

Dangerous Beauty

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CHAPTER IV

~~RECENT VISITS.~~

MRS. THURSTON always declared that this was the most uncomfortable and disturbed night she had ever spent. As a rule she slept like a top. Wild elephants, she asserted, could not wake her. But to-night she climbed to her bedroom with what she described as "that unsettled feeling," and it persisted long after she got into bed. She attributed it to the unusual behaviour of her second floor back. There was no doubt about it, Miss Wray's behaviour had been very unusual. Returning from the office on a Tuesday immediately after lunch—taking a bath right on top of the lunch (it, indeed, she had had any lunch)—then the telephone inquiry from the office—then the agitated gentleman who had made his decision not to have any dinner (he must have had some lunch)—and then the green and blue evening frock laid out. Mrs. Thurston had gone into the room, drawn the bed—all these things had added to the atmosphere of unpleasant mystery, if not of alarm. She was usually very calm and anxious. Nervy. She entered the bedroom and took up the evening frock herself. Mrs. Thurston

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"haven't decided," Miss Wray had answered quite shortly.

Fancy not knowing, at half-past nine, whether you were going out for the evening or not! . . .

The front door closed while Mrs. Thurston was revolving the point in her mind. Not with a loud bang. Softly. But the sound rose to straining ears, and so did that of a taxi stopping. Mrs. Thurston was out of her bed with a bound. Peeping through the blind, she saw Miss Wray jump into the taxi, and the taxi glide away.

"So she *has* gone," thought Mrs. Thurston, and then rounded on herself. "Well, why shouldn't she? Most girls with her looks would be out every night, gadding about. She hardly ever does, unless it's by herself to the pictures. Yes, but you don't go off to the pictures half an hour before midnight! Oh, go to sleep Maria Thurston, do! You're like an old woman!"

The truth was that Mrs. Thurston was fonder of her second floor back than she realised, and it was anxiety, not curiosity, that kept her awake.

She dozed off. She awoke with a start. She had dreamt that somebody was ringing the front door bell. She dozed off again. She again awoke with a start. She had not dreamt that somebody was ringing the front door bell. Somebody *was* ringing the front door bell!

"Whoever can that be at this time of night?" she wondered.

An obvious solution occurred to her. Miss Wray, of course! She had forgotten to take her latch-key. Scrambling out of bed, with indignation and relief

ringing through her generous bosom, Mrs. Thurston géd into her old red dressing-gown, left her room

cole quickly down the stairs. The clock in the

bell struck midnight as she reached it. It provided her first surprise. What? Only half an hour since Miss Wray had left? It seemed more like three hours. . . . She hadn't been out long!

When she opened the front door she received her second surprise. At first she saw nobody. Then she saw the back of a man. He was going away. But he turned swiftly as the sound of the opening door registered in his ears, and she recognised him instantly. It was the gentleman who had called on Miss Wray that afternoon.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, and was back on the doorstep in a flash.

Mrs. Thurston stared at him while she drew her red dressing gown more tightly round her. Yes, there was no mistaking the gentleman, but he was different. "He's had a glass," decided Mrs. Thurston. "If not two!"

"I'm very sorry—very sorry indeed—for troubling you so late," said the visitor, rather thickly. "But—could I see Miss Wray?"

"What, at this time of night?" retorted Mrs. Thurston, indignantly.

"I must see her," answered the visitor. "It's important."

"Well, I'm afraid you can't see her," replied Mrs. Thurston.

"She is in bed?"

"No, she's out."

"Out," repeated the visitor, staring at the ground. "Out." Then suddenly added, "I'll wait."

"But I can't say what time she'll be in—" began Mrs. Thurston.

The visitor pushed past her and entered the hall.

Mrs. Thurston gasped. She wondered vaguely whether to send for the police. If a constable,

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passed at that moment she would have called him, although she had to admit that, so far, the gentleman was merely being unreasonable and had done nothing illegal. Then she recalled that a scene with a policeman in it was the last thing a respectable landlady required. The impulse weakened—to her subsequent regret.

Meanwhile, during sultry seconds, the visitor appeared to glean something of his danger, and he made an effort to ease the situation without yielding his point. He cleared his throat, and said, with dignity.

"There is nothing for you to worry about. You will remember I called on Miss Wray this afternoon. I am Mr. Menzies, her employer. This is office business."

"Oh," muttered Mrs. Thurston. "Isn't this rather late for office business?"

"Very late," agreed Mr. Menzies, "so you can be sure I would not trouble you unless it were important. As a matter of fact she expects me."

This was his second lie, but Mrs. Thurston had no means of knowing it. All she knew was that she disliked being seen by strange gentlemen in her dressing-gown.

"Couldn't you leave a note, sir?" she suggested.

"If I do not see her, I will leave a note," he answered. "But perhaps she will not be long. My—er—business will not keep her for more than a few moments. May I wait in there?"

He looked towards the room in which he had been shown that afternoon. Mrs. Thurston felt helpless. She thought he was being unreasonable, yet he could not be certain that she would not be more reasonable to refuse him. After all, he was not perfect stranger. He had given her his card when

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he had first called. She knew he *was* Mr. Menzies. There was no doubt he *was* her employer.

"Very well, sir," she yielded, unhappily. She was not up to interviews of this sort. She needed the late Mr. Thurston at her back. "You can wait for a few minutes, if you like."

"Thank you," murmured Mr. Menzies.

She pushed open the door of the sitting-room, switched on the light, and watched him enter. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she closed the door behind his back.

Well, that was that. What was the next step? Upstairs to bed again?

"No!" she decided, struggling against her physical inclinations and her sleepiness. "He may be her employer, I'm not doubting it, and he may have come to talk business, but I don't care for the look of him. I'll wait up!"

She crossed to the dining-room. At one end, exotically prominent, was a couch. It did not belong in any dining-room, and it was only there because the sitting-room was already choked and she had nowhere else to put it. As she stretched her weary limbs upon it, she was grateful to the superfluous piece of furniture for the first time.

The minutes ticked by. Her weariness grew upon her. "I hope she won't be very late," she thought; "but I'll wait up, if I have to wait till Doomsday!"

She closed her eyes, then opened them with a jerk.

"No, I mustn't do that," she reflected.

And promptly closed them again.

When next she opened them she felt cold. She also felt guilty. She was wondering how long she had slept when the hall clock began to strike.

One—"Half-past twelve," she thought—*two*—she sat bolt upright—*three*—*four*—*five*! *Six*

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She stumbled to her feet in agitated shame. Five o'clock? Never! That meant she had been asleep for nearly five hours, and her protective vigil had been a humiliating farce! She hastened to the door, nearly tripping over her dressing-gown in her bleariness, and switched out the light that illuminated her disgrace. By contrast the darkness seemed complete, but when she reached the hall an inclement, ghostly grey told her that first daylight was not far off.

The hall light had been put out. So had the light in the sitting-room, the door of which was now half open. She put on the light for a moment, to make sure that it was empty, and got ready to shriek at a corpse. She had a muzzy impression that she had dreamt of one. But no corpse lay upon the floor. She turned away with a shudder of relief.

"Fancy being so silly!" she chided herself.

She went to the front door. It was bolted. Her relief increased. Miss Wray was in.

Then, creeping quietly, for she did not want the stairs to proclaim her shame, she made her way back to her top bedroom, pausing only once as she reached the door of the second floor back.

She paused there to listen. Advancing her ear close to the keyhole, she heard breathing. "Yes she's got home safe and sound," she thought. "I hope the same can be said of that precious Mr. Menzies!"

CHAPTER V

THE BREATH OF THE DESERT

As the taxi drew up at No 7, Craddock Street, a man whose dark appearance may have been due to southern latitudes or just to the night lounged casually away towards the corner. Reaching the corner he paused, lit a cigarette, and watched Vera and her companion alight on the pavement. He noticed that her companion's attitude was rather odd, and that he seemed to be vaguely protesting; but when eyes were turned momentarily in his direction, he lounged right round the corner, and saw no more. For when, a minute later, he reappeared in Craddock Street, the taxi had gone and its two passengers had vanished.

"Really, there's no necessity, you know," said John, as Vera closed the front door quietly behind them.

"If there weren't any necessity you'd be more definite about it," answered Vera quietly, "and you'd have sent me away outside the Grosvenor."

"You've got a stubborn will."

"I expect yours can be even more stubborn when it's working, only just now it isn't working. Mine merely seems stubborn by comparison. Do you know, you never said a single word in the taxi?"

"Didn't I?"

"You lay back with your eyes closed——"

"I wasn't dying——"

"Who said anything about dying? But you're

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had a bad knock, and you look like nothing on earth, and you've still got some glass in your face, I believe. So please regard me as a mother, and be a very good boy."

His head was throbbing, and she was right about the glass, but he was able to appreciate the unintended humour in her last remark.

"I promise to be a good boy," he murmured, smiling faintly, "but I don't think I can regard you as a mother."

"All right. A nurse, then. The only useful thing I ever did in my life was to take a course of First Aid. But if I'm not enough, we'll have a doctor——"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I don't want a fuss."

"Then don't make a fuss about me, as I'm the only alternative. Well—do you live in this passage?"

He took a key from his pocket, opened a door on the right of the wide hall in which they stood, switched on the light, and stepped aside for her to pass in.

"Bachelor's quarters," he said, as she entered an attractive sitting-room. "Forgive the mess."

She glanced round the room with feminine interest. At one end was a half-open door leading to the bedroom. A partially filled suit-case lay on the carpet, with articles still waiting to be packed strewn around it.

"Going by air?" she asked, with her eye on a label.

"Yes," came his voice behind her, "but now forget about me. You've been wonderful. Heaven knows how many apologies I owe you. But all I

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need is just to lie down for a bit—yes, I expect I do need that——”

“ Then don’t delay any longer,” interrupted Vera. “ Get into bed at once, and when you’re ready call for the nurse.”

“ Look here, I can’t let——”

“ I see you’ve got quite an elaborate medicine outfit in your kit. That’ll be useful.” Then she rounded on him. “ We’ve done some pretty frank speaking since we’ve known each other, and now here’s some more! Don’t be an idiot! Don’t go in for all that silly delicacy business with me! Probably we’ll never meet again, so it won’t matter if I see you once in your pyjamas. Look at yourself in the glass, if you want to. You’ve held on to yourself too long. When people do that they keel over—and if you keel over in a jiffy, you *will* have me in a pickle!” She took his shoulders firmly, unconscious of the queer thrill her touch sent through him. “ Go to bed, John. I’m not going to leave you until I’ve got those splinters out, seen you settled, and *know* there’s no need for that doctor!”

He grinned weakly.

“ My God, aren’t you terrible?” he said. “ All right, Nurse.”

She removed her hands from his shoulders, and he turned and went into the bedroom.

She sat down in an arm-chair to wait. “ I wonder if *I’m* the idiot?” she thought. “ Oh, well, if your intentions are good, you’re supposed to go to heaven!”

Then another thought struck her, making the previous thought seem insincere. “ Heaven? Altruism? What bunk! I’m doing this to please myself—because I can’t tear myself away from the adventure of it! All my life I’ve been running

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"away from adventure—curling up like a hedgehog every time it touched me! Perhaps, really, I'm made for this sort of thing. Perhaps, for the first day in my life, I'm being true to type—and I've been holding on so long that I'm nearly keeling over. . . . I wonder?"

She jumped up and walked to a mirror on the wall, studying herself. She tried to discover the self beneath the perfect skin, to penetrate the exterior she knew so well, and she was baffled by her own mystery. She wished that, for just a second, she could have been a man looking at that reflection, so that she could see it from the male angle. The male angle was always about her. Within the last dozen hours it had taken her out to supper, and kissed the back of her neck. She thought, suddenly, of the man who had kissed the back of her neck. She had no notion that, while she thought of him, he was sitting in another arm-chair, waiting for her.

The open suit-case was at her feet. She glanced down at it, then stooped for a closer scrutiny of the label. She read the words Croydon and Khartoum....

"Nurse!"

The voice wrenched her back from African deserts and camels and tents; and almost guiltily, as though she had actually strayed from her duties in Craddock Street, she ran to the bedroom door.

"Can I come in?" she called softly.

"Yes."

He was in bed, and the effort of getting there was written on him. A sort of helpless self-anger was reflected in his eyes as he watched her approach.

"I don't think you'll be ready to go to Khartoum to-morrow," she commented.

"I'm going whether I'm ready or not," he

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answered, and then added quickly, " Hallo—been looking around ? "

" Just a little. You're beginning to find out the kind of a girl I am ! "

" You're finding out more about me ! But I don't mind, so long as ——"

" I'm discreet ? "

" Yes. You've gathered I'm—not very talkative about this trip." Suddenly his lips tightened and he gave a dry, not very happy little laugh. On the point of saying something he changed his mind.

" Well, Nurse, pull out the pieces, and then you can go home. I mustn't forget you've got a reputation ! "

" I'm not worrying about that," Veta answered. " There's only a landlady to ask questions, and she won't know anything about it ! "

Then she got down to business, and for nearly half-an-hour employed all the healing arts she knew. She removed several splinters of glass, bathed his cheek, applied ointment, and ended up with a bandage against which he feebly protested.

" Overdoing it, Nurse," he murmured. " I don't need that ! "

" Isn't it comfortable ? " she asked.

" Very."

" Then that's the answer to your objection ! And mind you don't take it off when I've gone ! "

He made a grimace. " May I take it off before I go to Croydon ? "

" No, keep it on all the way to Khartoum ! But, seriously, if you wake up to-morrow with a headache or a temperature—you've got a thermometer in your case—you're not to go even as far as Croydon. You're to send for a doctor. . . . Well, I expect that's all. Good-night."

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pas^a She spoke quickly. The unpleasant moment had come, and she wanted to get it over. But he held her hand when she extended it to him, and while he was holding it she exclaimed suddenly.

"Do me a favour!"

"What?"

"Just—curiosity. What were you going to say that time, when you changed your mind?"

"What time?"

"Don't you know?"

"Yes—I know," he said. "It was just a rather queer thought."

"And I mustn't hear it?"

"Well—why not? I was thinking—I was thinking that I may perhaps need some one like you before I'm through with my job—but that you were the very last person in the world I'd dream of asking. Good-night. Don't come and see how I am to-morrow, will you?"

"Why not?" she asked. "If I'd intended to?"

"Since we're pledged to frankness, I'll tell you that, too," he said. "I couldn't stand this twice over."

Then he closed his eyes, and as he didn't open them again, she slipped quietly from the room.

But she did not go. She did not feel happy about him. He had been through a lot of pain, and he was not the kind of man to let you know how much. He had looked very queer during the last few seconds. Suppose he got worse suddenly? Suppose his temperature *did* go up? There must be somebody in the building who looked after him—a man-servant, probably—she wished she had asked him—but he would have no one until the morning. And in the morning, whatever his condition, he would set off on his job—the job she might help him in, although

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she was the last person in the world whose help he would ask.

She sat down again in the arm-chair. Her gaze fell idly on her flashing diamond ring. All at once, as though in answer to a question that had not been asked, the value of the ring recurred to her. A hundred and thirty pounds. What proportion of that sum did it cost to get to Khartoum?

"No doubt whatever about it, my dear," she thought. "You are going quite, *quite* dotty!"

She heard impatient grunts from the next room. She rose, and tiptoed to the bedroom door. She heard more grunting, and, once, the word, "Hell!" He had shed his company manners and restraint. Worried, she returned to the arm-chair.

Then a moment occurred that was frequently recalled. As she sat down an end of her filmy cape floated against the mantelpiece, brushed against a sheet of paper, and brought it to the floor. She stooped to pick it up, and found herself staring at a face that startled her. It was a rough drawing of the head of a Sheik, and the artist had cleverly conveyed in a few lines an expression of amazing strength and power. There was something fanatical in the compelling eyes. Even from the paper they exuded a mesmeric influence, and were alive with purpose. But the face had other qualities, too. Eliminating the fanaticism, there were dignity and nobleness, and a courtesy held in leash. "If you are my friend, I will be yours," the eyes said, "but if you are not . . ." Whether the redeeming touches were reality's or the artist's, there was no knowing.

She replaced the picture on the mantelpiece with a little shudder, and an uncanny sense that this was merely a first meeting.

Vera waited an hour. She felt decentralised; or,

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pass
another, as though her centre had shifted ; and the residence of Mrs. Thurston did not call her. Already it seemed to belong to a previous life. But at the end of the hour she tiptoed again to the bedroom door, listened, heard nothing, and quietly opened the door. Dimly she made out the form on the bed. It was breathing peacefully and regularly. Her patient had forgotten his troubles, and was asleep.

She closed the door. She glanced towards the mantelpiece as she crossed the sitting-room, resisting the temptation to take a second look at the picture of the Sheik. All she saw was the flat foreshortened surface of the sheet, and the clock. The clock said eighteen minutes past two.

"Goodness!" she gasped.

She let herself out of the house noiselessly, watched in her mind by the world's uncharitable eye. But some one actually watched her. It was the dark man who had also watched her enter, and who still stood at the street corner, lighting another cigarette.

CHAPTER VI

VERA BURNS HER BOATS

IT was the note waiting for Vera when she returned that decided her course of action and gave her the excuse to act upon her audacious impulse. She never knew—and she often wondered—whether she would have burned her boats so completely otherwise, but the note supplied such an obvious motive that, while her cheeks flamed with indignation, her secret heart rejoiced. "Who *could* stay here after this?" she asked herself. "It would be intolerable!"

The note, displayed prominently on a chair in the hall—the chair had been moved to a position immediately facing the front door to avoid the possibility of ignoring it—was addressed in the familiar handwriting of Mr. Menzies, and it ran :

"MY DEAR Miss WRAY,—A terrible thing has happened. But for this, I would not have troubled you again. When I got home to-night my wife questioned me about you, and I found out that there is a spy in my office, and that my wife knew the answers to her questions before she put them. She even knew that I had called upon you this afternoon, and she taxed me bluntly with unfaithfulness. But for the tragedy of it, it would have been funny, for I have been struggling not to be unfaithful to my wife for years—you may believe it or not, but I have succeeded and—the knowledge of this struggle made my denials unconvincing. There was a frightful row. I wonder if you know what a jealous woman can be

like when she is roused? Yet all the while I was sorry for her as well as for myself, until she said such wicked things—wicked because untrue—that I gave up.

"Nothing I could say will alter her conviction. Nothing you could say would alter it. The quarrel went on all the evening, and it seemed as if it would go on all the night. At the end I did a foolish thing. You must forgive me, but I lost my head. I said, 'All right, perhaps I have been unfaithful! What are you going to do about it?' I was goaded, and I forgot your side of it for the moment. I regretted it immediately afterwards. I have never seen such a look on a woman's face. I hardly recognised her. 'I will hound her till she wishes she had never been born,' she cried. 'I will see she never gets another job. I will drive her to the river, where she belongs.' She said a lot more, and she meant it. At last I could stand it no longer, and I came here to see you.

"Well, what are we going to do? Even while I am writing I keep on listening for your return, and wonder where you are. But I dare not wait any longer. Probably, by coming, I have only made matters worse. You see the condition I am in.

"The matter will not end here. I have an idea my wife will call on you to-morrow—or your landlady. She will not let this drop. I think it would be better if you would go away. It would save a scandal, possibly worse. Of course, I am responsible for this—at least, for the beginning of it—and I should have to help you financially, so if you agree to this will you write to me at the office, marking the envelope private, of course, saying where we could meet, or where I could telephone to you. My mind is not very clear just now, and I cannot think of anything else, but we must get in touch somehow—

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you see that, don't you?—and then we can talk it all over. If you wished, you could go somewhere where I might perhaps join you later. But that would be for you to decide. It may be that I won't be able to stand it at home after this. Anyway we must talk, and then we will decide the best thing to do. Only please, I beg of you, do not see my wife. I fear what might happen."

Then the letter concluded with some maudlin, pathetic sentences, and with a repetition of the suggestion that, if she were willing, and felt they could be friends, he would be ready to follow her "if circumstances work out that way."

It was the crystallising of his attitude in that final phrase that completed Vera's disgust, and that proved how little he understood her even now. Had he been more honest—or more astute—he would have said, "I've landed you in the cart, and I'm finished too. Can we pick up the pieces and build something out of them together?" She would have refused—obviously—but at least she would have recognised his frankness and the sincerity of his offer. As it was, however, she was to go away, and he was to sit on the fence and see whether the wind blew him home again or after her!

Vera read the situation correctly saving in one vital particular. She did not fully realise the mental condition Mr. Menzies had been in while scribbling that wild and rambling note. This was brought home to her later in startling fashion.

Replacing the chair—for long afterwards she rarely saw a chair out of position without a little subconscious shudder—she stole up to her bedroom to think. She thought with a hard clearness, and resolutely avoided the pitfalls of subtleties.

"Do I go, or do I stay?" she asked herself.

Her mind was already made up, but she had to produce the arguments.

If she stayed, she would have to face the ruthless wrath of a jealous woman. If the wrath were not definitely dangerous, and there was every suggestion that it might be, it would at least pursue her. Possibly from job to job, and from lodgings to lodgings. Her physical beauty would argue against her protestations—if she troubled to protest—and would form all the evidence against her required by an uncharitable and scandal-loving world. Even her nocturnal visit to bachelor's chambers would be unearthed as further proof of the sort of girl she was! And, while the hateful business was proceeding, she would be haunted by the tragic Mr. Menzies himself who—"if matters worked out that way"—would try to tempt her to become his mistress. For that, in blunt terms, was the position. . . .

"If I stay," her thoughts added.

Well, what would be the position if she did not stay? What would it be if, instead of facing the mud, or hiding herself miserably in some other spot in London or the provinces, she accepted adventure with both hands and went to Africa with the only person who held any vital interest for her in the world?

Of course he would not consent if she put the proposition to him. But she would not put the proposition to him. She would not saddle him with any responsibility for her actions. She had a diamond ring worth a hundred and thirty pounds, and she would buy her own ticket. And, when they reached Khartoum, after a journey through the sky that seemed in itself sufficient compensation for whatever



might follow it, he might give her that job for which he had said she was so suited, yet which he had also declared he would never offer her.

She sensed he was going into danger—danger associated with the Sheik whose picture she had found on the mantelpiece—and that it was mainly because of this that he had recklessly invited a strange girl to supper on his last evening in England. Such recklessness was common to soldiers on final leave before going over the top. She was quite ready to go over the top with him. Of the two battles she was comparing, she felt this would be the cleaner.

With her decision made, she turned her mind to practicalities. The first was Mr Menzies' letter. Should she answer it? Perhaps she ought to send a few lines. But her first attempt was a failure, for as she proceeded her indignation got the better of her, and when she found herself writing, "I have no intention of staying here to be insulted, and possibly murdered," she stared in astonishment at what she had written, struck a match, burned the sheet, and dropped the ashes into the waste paper basket.

Her second effort ran :

"DEAR MR MENZIES,—I am sorry this has happened. I do not think any good could come from meeting you again, and you will not see me or hear from me any more. But I want to say just this, even at the risk of hurting you, so that you can show it to your wife, if you wish to. Even if I were the kind of a girl she thinks I am, there could never have been anything between us, because you are not the kind of man I could ever have had an affair with. Good-bye and good luck."

"That's being cruel to be kind," she reflected, as she slipped the note in an envelope and sealed down the flap.

Next came a letter to her landlady. This was equally necessary, since Vera had decided to leave before Mrs. Thurston was up. She wished to avoid verbal explanations that would be distasteful and arguments that might prove weakening. Moreover, a chance word, or a watched departure, would perhaps provide some clue to her destination that could be passed on. That was the last thing she desired.

The second letter was hardly easier to write than the first. "Something is driving me away," she wrote, "and I can't tell you what it is. But I know I am doing right in leaving, and if you think the worst of me, you will be glad I have gone, while if you think the best—as I hope—then you will be sorry perhaps, but you will trust me. Anyhow, this is the only way to end it, and will make the least trouble for you. I am taking my suit-case. The rest of my belongings are packed in my trunk. Will you keep the trunk for me until I send for it, even if it is a very long time? I paid you up to last week and I am now enclosing enough to cover the fortnight's notice that was our arrangement."

And, finally, the packing of the suit-case and the trunk. That was a dismal affair. It produced the inevitable reaction too soon, and she fought depression while she packed.

Afterwards, she dared not go to sleep. Dressed in her travelling costume—she had put her evening dress in the suitcase, wondering when she would next wear it—she sat in her arm-chair with her eyes resolutely open. Several times she nearly dozed, and once she did drop off for a few minutes. It was during these minutes on that strange, uneasy night

that Mrs. Thurston passed her door and heard her breathing. She woke, with a start, at half-past five. Then she dipped her face in cold water, and pretended she was just rising after a good night's rest.

She was out of the house by six. She was taking no chances. It gave her a queer sensation to wander through the deserted, gradually awakening streets, and during her wandering she glimpsed an aspect of life that was new to her. She saw a ragged man asleep in a doorway. An old woman, with eager eyes, searching among the garbage in a dust-bin before the cart arrived to bear away its doubtful treasures. A line of policemen, marching in single file to their beats. Milkmen, rattling. Postmen, trudging. The first bus. The first opening shop. . .

It was a relief when the traffic arrived and the streets began to fill with people. It rendered her less conspicuous. But a rather surly man who served her breakfast in a back-street restaurant eyed her curiously, and she was glad to escape from him into the business of the morning. And she had plenty of business to occupy her mind once she started.

Croydon was her final objective, but she did not reach it till just after midday. As she neared the aerodrome her heart suddenly began thumping. Suppose she was on a wild goose chase? Suppose he was not here? Suppose he had taken a turn for the worse, and had had to delay his departure, after all? Well, in that case she would turn round and go back to London. . . .

"Piper, miss?" shrilled the newsboy. "Body fahnd in front garden. Piper?"

But she hardly heard him. Her eyes were on the boy's last customer. He was the man she was seeking.

CHAPTER VII

UP IN THE CLOUDS

"VERA!"

He caught sight of her over his newspaper, and stared at her in astonishment. She was filled with such happy excitement that she did not notice how swiftly he lowered the paper, giving it a sudden fold as he did so. She merely smiled with inexpressible relief into his eyes, unconscious of the violent conflict of emotion behind them. A question rose to his lips, but he suppressed it, and asked another.

"Have you come to see me off?"

His tone, as his expression, concealed the conflict. It was almost unnaturally light.

"I've come to see myself off," she answered.
"How are you feeling?"

"I—don't understand!"

"It's quite simple. I'm going to Khartoum. Are you going that way, by any chance?"

She laughed. The voyage through the sky had not yet started, but she was already in the air. He looked at her closely, then drew her a little aside, out of the throng.

"Has anything happened?" he asked quietly.

"Lots," she replied, "but I want to forget it. I asked you just now how you were feeling? You've discarded your bandage, I see."

"Yes. I'm all right. It's you I'm thinking of at the moment. Has anything bad happened?"

"Bad?"

"People don't generally rush to Khartoum at a moment's notice!"

"And they don't accept supper invitations from strangers. Or do they? You see, John, I don't know. I'm just taking your advice, and finding out what type I am. Shall we leave it for the time being at that?"

He glanced around. He let the newspaper slip from his fingers to the ground, then put his foot on it casually as she glanced down.

"What about your ticket?" he inquired.

"I've got that," she said. "I've had a busy morning."

"Do you know what you're going to do when you reach Khartoum?"

"I'll tell you that when we get there."

There was a sudden stir among the throng. The human current increased towards the air-liner. A policeman strolled by casually.

"Right!" exclaimed John suddenly. "Come along—I'll steer you on board."

A few minutes later Vera began a new experience. Smoothly, almost unnoticeably, the ground began to sink below her. She had expected a qualm at the moment of leaving *terra firma*, and had imagined that for a little while she would have to conquer nervousness; but she found nothing to be nervous about. She felt like a soldier who had steeled himself for a battle, and had then failed to discover the enemy.

The aerodrome grew smaller and smaller. The trees dwindled into toys. People became ants, then vanished. She met clouds in their own region for the first time.

"Oh, this is divine!" she thought. "I hope it will never stop!"

Her expression reflected her thought, and John, seated opposite, regarded her with quiet perplexity.

"Like it?" he asked.

"It's too wonderful," she answered.

"First time, eh?"

She nodded.

"Well, it's a good thing you do like it," he said, "because there's plenty more coming, though we've got one stretch by train—and a long one, too. Paris to Brindisi."

She felt almost drunk with light-heartedness. Yesterday, what did that matter? To-morrow, why think of that? To-morrow wasn't here yet! But these glorious moments were here, and the gliding through space, and the sky and the clouds, and companionship. . . .

"You know, I can hardly realise this!" she exclaimed.

"Nor can I," he replied. "And there's something else I can hardly realise."

"What?"

"Why, that twenty-four hours ago we'd never met. We didn't even know the other existed. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Yes." Then she retracted. "No, I'm not sure. Perhaps this is the way things happen—or ought to happen. Real things. Perhaps we cheat the real things by our conventions—and cages! Do you think that? No, never mind. I don't want to get philosophical. I think I'm a little drunk, you know. Don't pay any attention."

He smiled. How pleasant it would be to forget things in her society. And how easy, if one lacked all sense of responsibility! The smile faded.

"Do you mind getting practical?" he asked.

"That sounds even worse," she returned. "I should probably hate it!"

"I'll take the risk."

D A N G E R O U S B E A U T Y

"Yes, you're good at taking risks."

"I wouldn't call *you* a novice!"

"That's the only unintelligent remark I've heard you make to date. And it doesn't fit your diagnosis of me, either. You told me I was afraid of life. You were right. This is the first real risk I've ever taken."

"Yes, of course. But the size of it makes up for all the others you haven't taken!"

"I wonder. Somehow, it doesn't seem as big as it ought to. The adventure, yes! That's enormous! But risk? Shall I tell you something rather funny? I feel it is less of a risk sitting here with you, and going to a country I've never been to before, than it would have been if—if I'd kissed Mr. Menzies back!"

She frowned at herself. She hadn't meant to mention Mr. Menzies. She swore she wouldn't again. He was like a black cloud among all these white ones.

"How did you get to Croydon?" he asked abruptly. "You weren't on the Airways coach."

"No, I couldn't make it."

"But it's the quickest way."

"Yes, if you happen to be at Victoria, where it starts from. I was nearer London Bridge. I had to go to a shop there to—"

She paused, and glanced at her finger. He followed her glance.

"Will you be wearing that lovely ring again?" he asked. "The one you wore at the Grosvenor last night?"

"You're getting back your intelligence!" she laughed.

"Thank you. I hope you received a good price for it?"

"I must have, or I wouldn't be here."

"Do you mean, you wouldn't have had the price of your fare if you hadn't sold your ring?"

"Nothing near it. So you see, I'll have to find a job when I get to Khartoum?"

"Whew!" he muttered.

"But I won't depend on *you* for it," she added, quickly. "We just happen to be travelling together, that's all."

"Vera," he retorted, "there are occasional moments when your lack of intelligence is even greater than mine! Do you think, you perfect idiot—" He stopped. "The fare to Khartoum is £70. Single fare. Did your ring produce enough over for the return?"

"I'm afraid not, John," she answered.

"Then—you have no intention of returning?"

"This sounds awfully like a cross-examination!"

"I can't help what it sounds like. If I need any excuse, I'll remind you of something. You said this didn't seem as big a risk to you as it ought to. Was that true?"

"Truth is our bargain."

"Then please go on being truthful. Am I the reason why the risk doesn't seem so big?"

"I—I expect you are."

"That means, you must have some faith in me?"

"Don't be conventional. You know I have faith in you."

"Faith that I can, if necessary, get you out of a scrape?"

"Scrape?" she repeated. "Nasty word. No, not that you *could* get me out of a scrape—out of any scrape—but that you'd try. I'd do the same for you."

He took a deep breath. It was difficult to remain

DANGEROUS BEAUTY

practical when impulse begged only for the personal equation

"Very well, then," he said "I am cross examining you, Vera, because I have got to justify that faith in you by looking after you And how—how the devil can I look after you if I don't know the exact situation?"

She removed her eyes from his face and stared out of the window She had forgotten for a moment that she was flying Now the thrill of it swept back to her, and she almost resent'd the intrusion of practicalities Practical things were for the earth Now she was just the dot in the sky, and she did did not want to be anything more

But John had to be answered

"The exact situation is this," she said, still looking out of the window "I am in a bit of a scrape It's partly because of the scrape that I answered my mad impulse, and—sold my ring But I don't want to talk about it I can't bear to Later—perhaps And meanwhile, John, please remember that you have your secrets, too, and I'm not asking for any of *your* information I'm just trusting you, as I'd like you to trust me I expect we can still go on being frank without tearing every little detail out of our hearts" Now she turned to him suddenly, and the frankness she had just mentioned lay in her eyes "But if you're at all unhappy about all this, or uneasy—or if it makes things too difficult for you in some way you can't explain, I'll understand You've only to say so We'll separate in Paris, and that'll be the end of it"

"What will you do if we separate in Paris?" he demanded

"Since the separation would be complete, there's

no need to tell you," she responded. " It wouldn't be your affair any longer."

" Perhaps you don't know what you'd do ? " he persisted.

" Perhaps I don't."

" Would you go back to London ? "

" No ! Not for a while anyhow. I've been to Paris once before, and I can speak French. I might get a job there."

" Passport in order ? "

" I've seen to all that."

" Tell me one thing," he said, after a pause, " even if it sounds like more cross-examination. Would you be in actual danger if you returned to London ? "

" I might be," she admitted. " What about you in Khartoum ? "

" That's why I asked. There will certainly be danger in Khartoum. I can't offer you any sort of a haven."

" I didn't expect you could. But I prefer the danger ahead to the danger behind. It's for you to decide, though. I'm still waiting to know what you want."

The plane dropped suddenly, giving her her first tremor.

" Air-pocket," said John, as the plane regained its lost altitude. " Apt to meet 'em over Kent."

But she knew that he wasn't thinking of the air-pocket.

" I'm a selfish, thoughtless beast ! " she exclaimed. " It's settled I leave you at Paris."

" It's settled you don't," he answered.

CHAPTER VIII

PARIS

THEY crossed the sea, soared over French soil, and dropped down to Le Bourget at a quarter to three

Among the clouds, which had often lain like a thick white carpet between them and the world they had risen from, concealing it utterly, Véra had almost ceased to believe in the reality of that lower world. The centre of existence was the ether that stretched through limitless space to the unseen stars (How wonderful, she thought, night flying must be, and hoped she would experience it). It seemed impossible that people were still crawling about below that traffic still filled the streets, that typewriters clicked, that husbands and wives bickered and that the cobweb in Mrs Thurston's bathroom drooped depressingly from its ceiling corner.

But when she was back on the ground, jostled by the realities she had temporarily dismissed her mind reversed and the amazing unpossibility was now the sky with herself speeding through it "Was I really and truly up there?" he asked herself "And feeling safe? Oh, nonsense!"

She turned to her companion and noticed that he was looking about him, scanning faces.

"Well, what do we do now?" she inquired.
"Go direct to the station?"

A car was waiting to convey those passengers who had not completed their journey to the Gare de Lyon. Some were bound for Florence and Brindisi, some for Cairo, two at least for Khartoum, and one

for Johannesburg, an eight days' trip. The passenger for Johannesburg was a perfectly-groomed man of about forty, who had sat behind Vera in the air-liner and made a thorough study of her back. But John did not take her to the car. He seized her arm suddenly and steered her quickly and quietly to a taxi. Then, after giving an address to the driver in a low voice, he jumped in after her, and the taxi began rattling away.

It was an old taxi, and it had rattled for many a moon, but that did not interfere with its speed. Possibly it felt it had lived too long and was attempting to commit suicide. Vera felt far less safe in the taxi than she had felt in the aeroplane.

"I wonder whether you and I will ever go through an ordinary experience together in an ordinary way!" she gasped, as the taxi swung perilously round a corner.

"Let's keep hoping—we're still young," he smiled. "But this *is* an ordinary way for a French taxi. Continental drivers don't believe in Safety First."

"I should think not! Is this speed his idea, or yours?"

"His entirely. But it suits mine."

"I gathered it might. Are we trying to get away from somebody?"

"Shouldn't be surprised."

"I mustn't know who?"

"Don't worry."

"I'm not worrying. Yes, just a little, perhaps. But not about the person we're trying to get away from."

"Who are you worrying about, then?" he asked.

"A man whose first name is John. When I first met him, he bowled me over with his frankness—"

" He made you indignant."

" Only for a few moments. Till I got used to it."

" And now you're worrying because he's become a bit of an oyster—like a girl whose first name is Vera. We'll both come out of our shells again one day. Meanwhile—trust steps in where frankness fears to tread. That's the way to look at it, isn't it ? It was your own idea."

" Of course it was," she answered penitently. " I'm sorry."

" For heaven's sake don't start apologising ! " he exclaimed. " I couldn't stand that ! If I'm going through a queer time, I know you are. Maybe—I'm not sure, it's what I'm trying to work out every moment—but maybe it's as well for both of us that we've got each other. And—" He paused, then went on, " And maybe something else, as well. Maybe I know a little more about *your* queer time than you think I do ! "

" Well, after what I told you last night at the Grosvenor—goodness, was that only last night ?—I expect you can guess who's at the bottom of *my* queer time ! "

" Yes." He looked at her almost desparately, then turned away and stared out of the window. " Seen him since ? " he inquired casually.

But he found her reflection in the glass, and watched it.

" Shouldn't be surprised," she replied, quoting him.

John took his handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his brow. Then he put his head out of the window, and said something to the driver. The effect appeared to increase the driver's fondness for corners. He swung round a couple in quick succession.

" Aren't we going back ? " answered Vera.

"Not to Le Bourget," asked John.

"To the Gare de Lyon?"

"We're paying a call first."

"Do I pay it with you?"

"No, you don't move out of the taxi. That is, if you don't mind taking orders."

"I do mind taking orders. I've come away to escape from orders. But I don't regard those as orders."

The Paris they drove through was not a Paris Vera recognised. If they crossed streets she had seen on her previous visit, she viewed them now from a new angle. Then it had been holiday. She had made a beeline for the famous spots—the Champs Élysées, the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, Napoleon's Tomb. But now it was dangerous adventure, even though the holiday spirit lurked so pleasantly behind it. She saw, or noticed, none of the familiar places apart from the Eiffel Tower, which in Paris is omnipresent, and the taxi seemed to favour narrow streets and unfashionable thoroughfares.

"Where are we going?" she wondered, while temporarily suspending questions. "What is this mysterious visit?" Then came another thought, springing suddenly from the darkness of unadmitted anxiety. "I hope it won't be a long visit!" The prospect of waiting alone in the taxi was not very welcome.

She glanced at the taximan's back. There was nothing sinister about it. The driver was a cheery soul.

Presently they stopped in a rather gloomy road outside a rather gloomy shop. Tobacco and sweets, neither adding to the beauty of the other, merged in the window.

"I won't be long," said John.

A moment later he had slipped from the taxi and into the shop.

She found the waiting more trying than she had expected. Before a minute had gone by she imagined she had waited five. She was angry with herself for the fears she could not keep back. She grew more and more angry with herself as the fears increased.

"If you lose your nerve now," she asked herself, "what's going to happen to you later?"

She peered over the shoulder of the driver towards the end of the foad. A figure had just turned a corner and had come into view. It seemed vaguely familiar. Not unlike the dark man who had been lurking outside John's rooms on the previous night.

"You perfect little *idiot!*" she fumed. "Now start imagining things!"

But an instant later she reversed her opinion of herself. She was not imagining things. She became certain that it *was* the man.

Her mind began racing furiously. It was racing the slow approach of the man. Afterwards she was amazed at the promptness with which she acted, as also at the daringness of the action itself. She was out of the taxi almost before she knew it, speaking rapidly, but with no outward show of flurry, to the driver. Two factors helped her. Without either, her plan would have been shipwrecked. She spoke French fluently, and she had changed some of her money into French notes at Cook's in London.

"Take this quickly and quietly, and do what I say," she said to the driver, handing him a fifty-franc note. "I am going to speak into the taxi as though some one were there. The moment I have finished, drive off in the direction of the Gare de

Nord, but after you have been going ten minutes turn round and come back again. Shake off any one who may be following you."

She was lucky in her driver. If he was astonished, he did not show it. This may have been due to his quickness, or to the fact that his eyebrows were permanently raised, giving him a chronic appearance of surprise at everybody and everything.

"*Gare de Nord ? Bien !*" he cried, with a loudness for which she inwardly blessed him.

As he prepared to let in the clutch she slipped back to the window—she had pulled the curtains across as she had left the taxi, though she hardly remembered doing it--and called in.

"Well, au revoir, John. Be good ! And don't forget--I'm lunching with you to-morrow at Craddock Street."

The taxi lurched forward violently, swung to the other side of the road, and passed the approaching man at speed. Vera waved after it. The man stopped. She saw him stop out of the corner of her eye as she entered the shop.

The interior of the shop was dim. She ran straight into John, who was emerging from the shadows at the back.

"Quick—go back at once—quick !" she gasped.

With infinite relief she saw that his mind could race as fast as hers. He turned without a word.

She followed him. From a dark spot behind a counter they watched the little slit of light that marked the half-open shop door, themselves watched by a very fat woman whose mouth was wide open. For a complete minute the slit of light remained undisturbed. Each long second that passed was an agony, though each a little less agonising than the one that had preceded it. Surely, by this time, the

man would have reached the shop—if he were going to reach it at all !

Then Vera's heart jumped. A form suddenly filled the slit, paused, and pushed the shop door open. It was an old man with white whiskers. Vera could have thrown her arms round his neck.

" Allumettes," he said.

The fat woman darted forward.

" Voici, m'sieur," she breathed, handing him a box of matches.

" Merci," said the old man.

He pulled a pipe from his pocket, lit it slowly, and looked vaguely across the counter.

" Très chaud," he observed.

" Oui, très chaud," agreed the fat woman.

" Très, très chaud," he nodded.

He looked again across the counter. Beauty was beyond his reach, but he still dreamt of it. He turned and departed, and dreamt of it again that night. Very wickedly.

" Now—what's it all about ? " asked John quietly.

" Wait ! " whispered Vera, and made a movement towards the door.

" No—you wait ! " said John, holding her arm.

He spoke a few words to the fat woman. She nodded obediently, and waddled to the shop door. After a glance outside she returned and reported.

" Rien ! "

Then John drew Vera into a back room, and she told her story. He listened gravely, and when she had finished patted her shoulder.

" And the taxi will be back here in about quarter a of an hour ? " he said.

" I hope so," she answered. " It's got our bags ! I had to take that risk."

"It was a good risk. . . . You kept your nerve when you met your first air-pocket—and now this. You grow better and better."

"Thank you. Will I do?"

He stared at the carpet for a few moments before replying. Then he said:

"There's more coming, you know."

"I expect there is."

"More than you can possibly expect."

"Am I complaining?"

"No. You wouldn't complain. Once you were afraid of life—but now you've seized it with both hands, and you won't let go. But I'd give my soul, Vera, to get you out of this." He gave a little despairing shrug. "Only—as matters are turning out—I don't see how I can."

"Thank God you can't, John," she answered. "Will it help you to know how I feel? I feel—as if I were being reborn!"

"Don't say things like that," he murmured. "They bowl me over."

He turned his eyes away from hers, as though suddenly unable to bear them. He was visualising the London posters.

CHAPTER IX

HECTOR BRENT MAKES A SUGGESTION

AT 17.15—which Vera's insular mind translated back to a quarter-past five—the Milan express steamed south-eastwards out of the Gare de Lyon.

The taximan had justified the confidence placed in him. He had returned to the shop in exactly twenty minutes, picked up his fares again, driven them to the Gare de Lyon as though twenty thousand ogres were chasing them, and accepted his generous payment with an expansive smile. He had performed the further service of asking no questions while many were in his mind. The answer he favoured was a runaway couple. He had a soft spot for runaway couples. If he had run away ten years ago with a rosy-cheeked flower girl he might now have been a happy father with half a dozen rosy-cheeked children, instead of a henpecked husband with only a taxi.

Seated in their wagon-lit, the subjects of the taximan's secret envy watched Paris slip drably behind them and fade into a strange and breathless memory. They had been silent in the taxi. They were silent now. There were many hours ahead of them for conversation, but at the moment ordinary conversation seemed impossible; almost insincere. Normally Vera would have found infinite pleasure in commenting on the new scenes she passed through—the quaint suburbs that gave no outward reflection of the Gay City they fringed, the fields that looked so different from English fields, the children with

their precocious, almost cheeky assurance, the blue farm implements. But while her mind teemed with more vital matters the scenery slid back like an undeveloped retreating procession, creating no stir, and leaving no mark.

She discovered that she was tired.

Her companion, also, seemed tired. If he had made an effort, she would have responded. He lay back in his corner, however, with eyes often half-closed, thinking like her of those more vital matters, or escaping from them by making his mind a temporary blank.

The silence did not estrange them. It added to their sense of companionship. Acquaintances, not friends, have to talk. But presently he roused himself, with the first tinge of self-consciousness he had shown in her presence, and exclaimed :

"By Jove, I'm being a dull companion!"

"That hits us both—if either," she answered. "But, don't you remember, we've a compact to cut out small talk."

"So we have."

"Then we needn't worry, need we?"

"You're not?"

She shook her head.

A train attendant came along the corridor, announcing "Premier diner." They went into the dining-car and took their seats at a small table. Behind them sat the perfectly-groomed passenger for Johannesburg, but this time he was facing Vera, and he now made a thorough study not of her back but of her features. Once she caught his scrutiny over John's shoulder, and frowned.

"It's that curl," murmured John. "I've warned you about it before. Shall I turn round and hit him?"

" You've eyes in the back of your head," she answered, the frown vanishing.

" I need them," he returned. " What's the betting he gets into conversation with you before long ? "

" If he does, I'll tell you what he says ! "

It was a queer meal. At first it loosened their tongues, but in spite of their compact their talk was trivial, and soon they gave it up. Since the incident at the shop, John had grown graver and graver. She wondered whether the incident were responsible, or whether something else had happened, before she had entered the shop, to account for his humour.

Over the coffee she taxed him definitely.

" I suppose you *can't* tell me ? " she asked.

" Eh ? Tell you what ? " he answered vaguely.

" This new thing that's worrying you ! "

He did not answer at once. He offered her a cigarette, apologised for not having offered it before, lit it, lit his own, and watched the smoke ascend. Then he said abruptly :

" I'm not sure that it is a new thing."

" You didn't seem so worried in the aeroplane," she pointed out.

" No. But it existed then."

" And now you've had more time to think about it ? "

" I'm certainly thinking about it." He looked at her suddenly through the smoke. " I've got a problem to work out, you know."

" Yes, I know. But—if I'm the problem—I thought you had worked it out."

" Temporarily."

" I offered to leave you at Paris."

" And I refused the offer. That increases my responsibility, doesn't it ? "

" I can understand your thinking so," she agreed,

"but the real responsibility's mine. I'm a free agent. I can still break my journey before we reach Khartoum. Would you like to know that I'm thinking of it?" He looked at her sharply. "But I haven't decided to yet. I've got to be—surer. So why not follow my example meanwhile, and just sit back and let things happen?"

"Isn't that just what I'm doing?" he retorted. "Sitting back and letting things happen? But—of course—it can't go on indefinitely like this."

"Of course it can't."

"You realise that too?"

"Well, naturally. And although I'm sitting back, I'm waiting for the most important thing to happen, and wondering when it's going to."

"What's that?"

"Something between you and me. I'm waiting for us to get back to that—that ruthless frankness you treated me to at our first meeting—and that started this friendship, John."

"Oh, Lord!" he muttered. "Why aren't we on a river, punting, with nothing to think about but swans and water-lilies! Yes, it was that experiment in frankness that made us such quick comrades——"

"Nice word!"

"——but you knew, even then, that there were certain things I couldn't talk about."

"Yes, I knew that," she answered, "and I'm not sure those are the things we're now talking about. Are they?"

"What do you mean?"

"'What do you mean?' he asked to gain time. Oh, John, I'm not a fool. Not any longer, at least. Perhaps I was at Croydon—perhaps I was in Paris—right until we got on this train. But there's a wall between us that wasn't there at lunch yester-

day, or at the Grosvenor, or at your rooms. I'm not asking you to tell me your secrets. That's honest. All I'm asking—and waiting for—is to have that wall knocked down!"

After a little pause during which she saw his expression alter almost imperceptibly, he responded.

"Yes, Vera—I want that wall down, too. But you'll have to help me."

"Haven't I said I'm willing to?" she asked, vaguely worried by his tone.

"Well, you can prove it by answering this question. I've got to know whether you saw Mr. Menzies last night—after leaving my rooms?"

She stared at him in astonishment. The words hit her with the force of a hammer. She reddened suddenly.

"If that's the proof you need, I think I'll go back to my compartment," she said, rising.

So that was it! Mr. Menzies! Sheer adolescent, unintelligent jealousy! Disappointment pierced her with sharp pain as she groped her way along the swaying corridor. Something else seemed to be swaying—something that had arisen to give new meaning and solidarity to her life, and that now was toppling. . . .

She hardly heard the sudden roar of an express that met and passed them on the adjacent track. But when the roar had ceased she heard the hurrying footsteps behind her, and increased her speed, dreading the apology. The footsteps overtook her, and a voice that was not John's said:

"May I please have a few words with you?"

She stopped abruptly and turned. The speaker was the perfectly-groomed passenger for Johannes.

She was too confused to answer until he had

repeated his request with the addition, "We are just by my compartment—if you would step in for a moment?" Then she found her tongue.

"We don't know each other," she replied.

She hated the Early Victorian sound of her words.

"Unfortunately no," he agreed. "Perhaps that can be remedied?"

"Is there any reason why it should be?"

"A very good reason. You may think what I have to say is important."

She heard some one else coming along the corridor. Was it John? The idea of meeting him at that instant was intolerable. Almost unconsciously, and without turning her head, she stepped into the compartment.

"Thank you," said the perfectly-groomed passenger, entering behind her.

There was an awkward little silence; awkward, at least, to Vera. She recalled, suddenly, John's prophecy, and while the man regarded her with a rather disconcerting thoughtfulness, she wondered why she was permitting it. There was nothing definitely rude in his attitude, but his self-assurance was, somehow, vaguely insulting.

The self-assurance continued when he broke the silence.

"I'm not going to beat about the bush," he said. "That has never been my habit. My rule of life—in business, in pleasure, in friendship—is to consider carefully, and then to act definitely. I have thought carefully about this—and now I am acting definitely." He paused. "Do I go on?"

"I think perhaps you had better not," replied Vera. Her steady tone surprised her. "I have a rule of life, too."

"Yes, of course you have," he nodded. "And of

course you'd say something like that. But 'perhaps' isn't definite, you know, and until you are as definite as I am, I shall go on. Since truth rules us, however we twist it, I prefer not to twist it. My name is Hector Brent. Probably you've not heard of it, though plenty of business people have. I am a director of a firm of importers. I spend half my time in London, and half in Johannesburg. I am on my way to Johannesburg now, for six months. I have more money than I can spend. I shall be alone. And man was not designed to be alone." He paused again. Her heart was thumping violently, although she had sensed that something of this kind was coming. Wasn't it what always came in the end? The suggestion? Or the embrace without the suggestion? Well, at least, he had got them in the right order! . . . "Nor, for that matter, was woman."

"Have you finished?" she asked.

"The statement of the position—yes," he answered.

"And—and this is the result of what you called your careful consideration?"

"I have been considering carefully ever since we left Croydon. But——"

"Yes?"

"I have my sense of honour, though at the moment you appear to doubt it," he observed. "I should not have spoken to you as I have just done, if you had not quarrelled with your friend.. And now, forgive me. I see there is no point in going on. I hope you will make up your quarrel—even if I am the loser by it."

He had been standing between her and the door. He stepped aside, with a little gesture to imply that the interview was over. But Vera, her face suddenly flaming, did not agree that it was over.

"What kind of a girl do you take me for?" she exclaimed hotly.

"Why continue this?" he asked, with a slight frown. "I accept my defeat."

"I am asking you to continue with your definiteness, even in your defeat!"

"I see. Well, that's reasonable. You want me to tell you--really?"

"I wouldn't have asked, if I hadn't!"

"Very well." He studied his polished nails for a few seconds, as though seeking his words in their reflection. "I take you for a girl who is handicapped by her very dangerous beauty."

"And you're quite ready to add to the handicap!"

"Oh, no. You asked me what I take you for—not what I took you for. I did not realise I was adding to your handicap. I thought of you first as I have thought of other women who have shared my rule of life, and who, I can say, have not regretted it. Believe me, these women have never regarded *their* beauty as a handicap, though of course it has produced its little quarrels—sounding not unlike the quarrel I became conscious of between you and your friend—and its changes of partners. Well—now we know each other better. I am a man of forty who risks losing heaven for the sake of gaining the earth. You are a girl of—twenty?—who prefers a certainty of heaven and who refuses to speculate. Good-night—*prenez garde*—and *dormez bien*."

He gave a little bow—his manners were as perfect as his clothes—and turned to the window. She stared at his immaculate back while he gazed out at the darkening view. Yes, now they did know each other better. Her original loathing passed through a swift and confusing transition, though she could not define the sensations she was left with. Was she

a prig? Was she cheating? Did she know what her own rule of life was? She had referred to it glibly enough, but unlike Hector Brent she had not explained it.

"Thank you," she said. "I appreciate your honesty."

He turned abruptly.

"That's a new voice," he exclaimed. "It sounds as if you mean it."

"But I do mean it."

"Then I mean this. I hope you will make up your quarrel with your friend. But if you don't, and if Johannesburg is any good to you, it is still open—with no terms attached."

CHAPTER X

THE BLRTH ABOVE

BACK in her own compartment, Vera received two little shocks. The first was that John was not there. She thought he had passed along the corridor, and would have preceded her. The second was that the carriage had been transformed into a sleeping compartment with two neat berths, one over the other. It was a narrow compartment designed, happily, for two only.

She set aside the first shock in her contemplation of the second. She had, of course, anticipated this, and normally it would not have troubled her. Why should it, when on the previous night she had voluntarily visited a stranger's bedroom! But on the previous night her mood had been different. The thrill of the experience had been tempered with perfect harmony. There had been confidence and trust. Now there was vague doubt and jealousy. In a sudden moment she had made a fool of herself.

"*Have I made a fool of myself?*" she asked.
The next instant she answered

"Of course you've made a fool of yourself! You know you have! *That's* what is worrying you, my child! You're an idiot!"

It was small comfort to dwell on the fact that John might have been the idiot first. In cooler contemplation, she was not sure even of that. She might have misunderstood his question, or at least the motive of it. And if it *had* been inspired by a

little doubt or spark of jealousy, did that form any real excuse for her behaviour?

"I've made the unkind mistake of putting John on a pedestal," she decided, "and of assuming that he has placed me on one, too. That's all I've learnt from his splendid frankness! Certainly I'm on no pedestal, if employers kiss me while they are dictating, and I'm offered free trips to Johannesburg! Yes, and especially as I haven't the character to slam the door in their faces, but always end up by shaking hands!. Do I shake hands because I want the door to remain ajar?" She caught sight of her reflection in a little mirror. "Is that why I insist on this ridiculous curl?"

She plunged her fingers into it, and it became a sad thing. With an ironical laugh, she allowed her destroying fingers to repair their damage, and shape the curl back again.

"You see!" she told herself ruthlessly. "You *must* have your curl! Whatever your painted lips say, your curl is your means of communication, designed to draw men's frankness—of one kind or another! You're a fraud! You think you're angry with John, but all you're waiting for is for him to fall for your dairned curl! Little beast!"

She had begun her period of reaction by trying to excuse herself. Nerves—excitement—fatigue—these surely were enough to account for sudden semi-nine spasms and neurotic unreasonable moments! But now she went to the other extreme and blamed herself too much. She longed for John's return, so that she could show him her altered mood and set things right. Or for a hot bath, where things are set right automatically, without personal effort . . . Why didn't they have hot baths on trains? . . . And why *didn't* John return?

"Because I've hurt him," she answered the latter question. "He's keeping away for a bit, to let me cool down—and it serves me right!"

The train sped on through the darkening southwest. Somewhere ahead in this darkness rose the mountains of Switzerland, and beyond them the Simplon Tunnel and Italy. She recalled John's first mention of the Simplon Tunnel. She had not dreamed then that she would pass through it with him. . . . Or, at any rate, on the same train.

"If he doesn't come soon, I'll go and look for him," she thought presently.

She grew drowsy. She could no longer sit upright against comfortable cushions, but had to recline in the lower bunk, and the recumbent position, coupled with the narcotic rythm of the train, tempted her senses to slip away into the relief of thoughtlessness. The sound of the train seemed different from the sound of English trains. She could not define the difference—whether it was due to the engine, the permanent way, or just imagination. Perhaps the mere knowledge that she was on the Continent translated every ordinary sound into a foreign language; these identical noises, between London and Birmingham, would have created no impression, and provided no food for fancy. The dark villages they sped by were alive with unseen life. The stations they rushed through with a sudden metallic clatter were strange, unreal places. She could not see them, but she knew when she came to them by the clatter, and by the reflection of the lights racing backwards grotesquely on the ceiling.

Yes, but how was it that the lights could be seen so clearly on the ceiling? It was this fact that first made her realise, when the train jerked her out of a doze, the blue shade drawn over the lamp above

her. The compartment was bathed in a queer, dim light. Her dressing-case and John's suit-case—their only luggage—on the rack opposite revealed nothing but their shapes in the faint blue illumination.

"Was it like this when I first came back to this compartment?" Vera wondered lazily. Why did her mind feel so lazy? "I suppose it must have been. But I don't remember fixing the shade!"

The shade was high up. She would have had to stand on her tiptoes to do it.

She twisted her head and glanced at the window. The blinds were not drawn. She recalled that they had not been drawn when she had re-entered the compartment, for she had stood awhile, looking out; but as she twisted her head back again she experienced another disturbing little moment. The blinds on the corridor side of the compartment *were drawn!*

"I'm sure *they* weren't drawn!" she said aloud. Some one else had drawn them. And had fixed the shade over the lamp. Had entered the compartment to do these things, while she had been lying here, dozing.

She endured a miniature panic, which ended in the inevitable self-censure.

"Dear, simple-minded child, who once thought you had grown up," she chided herself. "Might not a train steward, with the excessive politeness of the Continent, have come in while you were snoozing, and pulled down the blinds and fixed the blue shade so that you could snooze on?... What *is* the matter with my brain? It feels like lead... Or might not John himself have done it?"

Then a new thought, startling in its simplicity, made her sit up and almost bump her head. Might not John have done it, and then have climbed quietly

into the bunk above her—and be there at this moment?

She listened. She could not hear any sound from above. She detested snoring. Sometimes Mrs. Thurston's snore had descended a complete flight of stairs and clicked outside her door, driving her to distraction. But she would have welcomed a slight snore now.

"Of course he's there!" she decided, for the comfort of the decision. "He came in softly, and was careful not to wake me up!"

She did not look lest she should be proved wrong. Playing the ostrich, she lay down again. Her clothes felt uncomfortable. She had an intense desire to stretch her free limbs before sinking again into oblivion. She supposed one usually took off one's dress and shoes in a sleeper. . . . Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud. . . . But, certainly, *she wasn't going to!* . . . Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud. . . . If they stopped for an hour or two in Milan she would find an hotel and a bath somehow or other. . . . Thud-thud, thud-thud. Darkness—an abrupt violent swaying as the train took a curve in Continental fashion—clatter-clatter—another procession of madly-swirling lights on the ceiling. . . .

She sat up again.

How long had she slept this time? She did not know. All she knew was that she could not settle down, and that she would wake up and wake up and wake up until she learned for certain whether the upper bunk were occupied or not. And also that her mind was now muzzier than ever, and felt like a heavy weight.

She strained her ears. A disturbing little memory came darting into her brain. She had once spoken

her thoughts aloud ; she had said, of the blinds, " I am sure they weren't drawn ! " If John had heard those words, surely he would have made some response ?

" John ! " she called softly.

There was no reply. Well—you can't reply if you're asleep, can you ?

" John ! " she called again, a little louder.

Now, though there was still no answer, she thought she heard a faint rustle.

" John ! Are you up there ? John ! "

She could not stand the uncertainty any longer. She had a horrible sense that she had awakened into a dream ; that she was not really awake at all. She wanted to talk, to disprove the dream, and to dispel the stifling atmosphere.

Preparing to rise, she looked up, and as she did so she heard once more the faint rustle. A hand slipped with the limpness of slumber over the side of the upper berth. She could just see the fingers glinting dully in the blue light. In this queer illumination they hardly looked like John's fingers. . . . They were not John's fingers ! They were dark. . . .

The next thing she remembered was being outside in the corridor, panting. Whether she had screamed or not before leaving her compartment she could not say.

Vera was used to loneliness, but she had never felt more utterly and helplessly lonely than at this moment. John had evaporated into thin air. In his place, inexplicably, was the man she had learned to dread more than any other man in the world, and whom she had believed to be hundreds of miles away in Paris. Without John, there was no one to turn to. And to add to her dilemma, the nightmare

heaviness that had been settling on her in the compartment seemed to have followed her out of it.

Suppose she gave way to it here in this narrow passage, while the owner of that limp hand was waking up !

Hardly knowing what she was doing, she began tottering along the corridor in the direction of the dining-car. That was the last spot where she had seen John, and although she had no hope of finding him there now, no other spot held any greater hope. Her legs dragged. She passed windows with drawn blinds, and envied the peace of those who slept behind them, and whose ears were oblivious to the ceaseless throb-throb that grew louder in her own ears every moment, combining with the thumping of her heart.

All at once she stopped. She realised that she was in the coach of the passenger for Johannesburg. It was the next coach to hers, and his compartment had been the farthest one at the very end. Perhaps he would help. . . .

She groped her way on again. At one time she doubted whether she could travel the length of the coach, for her legs were like lead, but she managed it, and knocked on the door as she toppled against it.

"Who's there ? " came a voice immediately.

"Please—let me in ! " gasped Vera.

The door was opened in a couple of seconds, and closed again as quickly. Vera found herself on a couch, with Hector Brent standing before her. He wore a dark red dressing-gown of exquisite design and material, and although it was in the small hours of the morning, his hair was as immaculate as though he had just completed his toilet for the day.

Behind him was his berth, with an open book upon

it. No other bed was made up. He had booked the complete compartment.

"What is the trouble?" he asked.

His voice was firm, but kindly.

"I—I don't know—I mean—" stammered Vera. Her head felt blazing.

"Has your friend rejoined you?" inquired Brent, making a shrewd guess to help her.

"No. That's it," murmured Vera. "But—some one else—in my compartment—when I woke up—" Hector Brent began to dissolve. She struggled desperately to retain him. "A man who—"

Then he vanished into the void that had been chasing her all along the corridor.

CHAPTER XI

WHILE VERA SLEPT

THE sun was high when Vera opened her eyes, and for a few dazed moments she had no idea where she was. She looked round for the walls of her London bedroom, expecting them to materialise out of the mist, but instead she was in a train. . . . a train she had dreamed about . . . Then memory came flooding back, and she tried to sit up. A hand pushed her gently down again.

"Not just yet," said a voice that also belonged to the dream. "Take things easily."

She obeyed. There was no alternative. For some minutes she controlled herself sufficiently to close her eyes and keep them closed, fighting a feeling of urgency. When she opened them again, she found Hector Brent—now in an immaculate grey suit—standing beside her with a cup of coffee.

"Drink this," he ordered. "And go on taking things easily."

"You're very good," she murmured.

"Hope for the middle-aged roue?" he smiled rather dryly.

She drank the coffee. It was pleasantly strong. Then she asked:

"I suppose I went off?"

"Very thoroughly," he nodded. "To my alarm. Being a middle-aged roue, I am used to fainting fits in the opposite sex, and have known them to occur at surprising moments in surprising places. A charming lady once fainted beside me in a taxi. I

knew how to deal with her. I just said ' Boo ! ' and made her laugh. But you were genuine, and put me in a difficulty."

He spoke lightly, and Vera knew that he was easing her recovery with entertaining small talk. But she knew, also, that he was watching her closely, ready for the moment when the small talk must end. And the moment was now.

" Please—what happened ? " she asked.

" I'm waiting to know that, too," he replied. " But I'll tell my story first. If you're quite ready for it ? "

" Yes."

" Well, after you fainted——" She noticed the little pause. " —I went to your compartment. How did I know it ? The first thing I did at the Gare de Lyons was to ascertain it. I need not remind you of my interest. You mentioned a man in the compartment. — thought I had better interview him."

" And did you ? " she inquired, holding her breath.

" I am afraid not," he answered. " You see, he wasn't there."

" Not there ! "

" No one was there. The compartment was quite definitely empty. Which, you will admit, put me in a further difficulty."

" He was in the top berth," said Vera.

" I suppose you are quite sure ? "

" Yes, I'll tell you——"

" No, wait a minute, please. I'll finish my story first. There really isn't much of it. I returned to you. I gathered the impression that you would not move for a long while. I left you again. Naturally, I couldn't look for the man who had frightened you

out of your compartment, because I had no description of him, so I looked for the man who—I take it—should have been in your compartment. Your friend. You mentioned just before you fainted that he had not rejoined you. This seemed a pity. He should have been doing what I was doing. I do not normally usurp other men's jobs."

"You've no need to whitewash yourself to me, Mr. Brent."

"Thank you. And for remembering my name. Your mind is clearing?"

"Yes."

"How about another cup of coffee? I can fetch it."

"No, thank you."

"I think you're wrong. However. Do you take drugs?"

She stared at him.

"I see you don't. Nor do I. Break all the ten commandments, by all means, but don't take drugs. But do you ever take sleeping draughts? Things for headaches?"

"I didn't last night. No, I never do," she added.

"That doesn't surprise me. You look much too healthy." He turned his head towards the window for an instant as he ran on, "Not the kind of girl who would allow a little quarrel, for instance, to give her morbid ideas."

"I thought you didn't beat about the bush," said Vera slowly. "I suppose you're asking me whether I tried to commit suicide last night?"

He turned back from the window.

"That is exactly what I am asking you," he confessed.

"Well, of course, I didn't!"

"Of course you didn't."

"What made you think I might have? Where are all these questions leading to?"

"If I am not to beat about the bush—they are leading to the fact that—after all—you did not imagine that man in your compartment."

"But you didn't really think I had imagined him?" she demanded, frowning.

"He wasn't there. I had to admit the possibility," he returned. "Remember, you were upset. You had had a quarrel. I am asking no questions, but you obviously had something serious on your mind. I had not contributed to the peace of that mind myself. But you remained asleep a very, very long time."

"You mean I was drugged?"

"You were undoubtedly drugged. That's why—now I know you did not drug yourself—I am concluding that the man in your compartment was not imagination, and that he escaped before I reached there. Tell me, did you drink—or eat—anything after leaving my own compartment?"

"No, nothing."

"Then when you go to bed to-night you may find a little mark somewhere on your arm. A little puncture. And you may know the reason for it. I, obviously, don't. Now I will conclude my story. I began looking for your friend. I could only look in a general way. I couldn't comb every sleeping compartment. Soon after I had begun the train slowed down and stopped. Not at a station. An accident farther along the line had caused a blockage, and the signal was against us. It remained against us for over three hours. Then the line was cleared and we continued on our way." He paused. "I didn't give up looking for your friend. I continued

the search later, at breakfast. He is not on this train, I am afraid. He either left it when it stopped at the signal, or at some previous halt. And the same may apply to the stranger in your compartment. Well, that's all I can tell you. Now it's your turn. I think you might begin with your name?"

"Miss Wray."

"Miss Wray. Thank you, Miss Wray. Well—oh, but wait a minute," he interrupted himself. "There is something else you may like to know. You may wonder why—so far—I have not reported anything to the officials on this train. I'll tell you. In the first place, what I had to report was rather vague. And in the second place, I really wanted to consult your own wishes in the matter. To be quite frank, I wasn't perfectly certain how you—stood."

"That was thoughtful of you."

"No. Natural. To one who makes his own rules, and sometimes breaks other people's. I had an idea—an instinct—that if I were not careful I might easily put my foot into something. Now tell me whatever it will help you to tell me, and leave the rest. I may be humanly interested, but I am not inhumanly curious. There is a gentleman in American called Nosey Parker who pokes his nose into other people's business. I never poke my nose into other people's business—and I can be quite severe on people who poke their noses into mine."

She looked at him gratefully.

"You're making it as easy for me as you can," she said, "and I hope you know I appreciate it. Yes—there's really very little I can tell you. Only that I must find my friend—I've got to! If he's not on the train, I'll have to get out at the next station and—"

She paused. And what?

He didn't return to your compartment?" prompted Brent.

"No. And presently I fell asleep. Once when I woke up I thought he must have come in quietly and climbed to the berth above me, but the next time I woke I had to find out, and just as I was about to look a hand moved down towards me, just over the side. I—I lost my head and ran!" She added, with a slight flush, "To you."

"That was fortunate," he answered. "But didn't you see more than the hand?"

"No."

"When I entered your compartment later, I noticed that the blue shade had been pulled over the light. It was pretty dim. You were quite certain, I suppose, it wasn't your friend's hand? No doubt about it at all?"

"Not the slightest. You see——"

She stopped short. How much more should she tell him?

"Yes?"

"It was a dark hand. I—recognised it."

"I see."

"The hand of a man who's been following us."

"That sounds unpleasant. Do you think, Miss Wray, it might assist you if I knew the reason this man has been following you?"

"I don't know it myself!" she exclaimed.

Hector Brent did look surprised then. He regarded her, in fact, with frank astonishment.

"Don't know it ~~yourself~~? " he repeated slowly. "You seem to be in a most unusual position, Miss Wray. Does your friend know it?"

"I—think so. Yes, of course." She frowned, half-regretting the admission of her own ignorance. "He'll tell me when I find him."

" I hope so. But meanwhile you are ignorant, and unwelcome people enter your compartment and drug you——"

" Please don't misunderstand my friend ! " she interrupted quickly.

" I am neither understanding nor misunderstanding him," returned Brent, " but—Johannesburg is still open."

" And don't misunderstand me, either ! " she shot out. " I'm sticking to my friend."

" In spite of the danger ? "

" Because of the danger ! It's his position, not mine, we've got to worry about." She corrected herself. " I mean, I've got to worry about."

She sprang to her feet. He looked at her curiously.

" What are you going to do ? " he inquired.

" I'm going to search this train from end to end," she replied.

" Why not wait till we reach Milan ? " he suggested.

" We won't be at Milan for hours," she retorted.

" We shall be at Milan in a few minutes," he said.

" What ! Are we in Italy ? "

" We are. I am sorry you missed Switzerland. I could have woken you up when you came out of your unnatural sleep and drifted into your natural one. You actually opened your eyes for a few moments—do you remember ? "

" No."

" I thought not. You went off again almost at once, and your last sleep has repaired the damage of the first. I hoped it would, and that was why I did not wake you. We have passed two frontiers—the Franco-Swiss at Vallorbe and the Swiss-Italian at Simplon. I brought your petits colis—small luggage

—to this compartment, thinking it might facilitate matters, and also be safer, if I became temporary guardian of it You will see the two bags on the rack. I am afraid you will not be able to write anything about Lake Maggiore in your diary—if you have the dangerous diary habit—because we have passed it And in a few minutes, as I've said, we shall be in Milan —three or four hours later than the scheduled time on account of that blockage on the line ”

Even as he spoke the pace of the train began to slacken, and the corridor to fill with eager, buzzing people emerging from their little hives Vera ran out of Hector Brent's hive, and scanned faces. The face she sought was absent. Then she ran back to her own compartment, entering it with a shivering memory of the moment she had left it The faint possibility that John had returned and would be anxiously awaiting her was shattered by the emptiness

The train was now stopping She stared out of the window as the platform slid towards her and gradually augmented from a pin-point to normal size. Her heart was desperate and heavy. The immediate future looked hopeless,

As the platform grew larger, she herself seemed to grow smaller till she became the pin-point the platform had been. She was a tiny speck in a great, busy space that had nothing to do with her, nothing to say to her, and no interest in her Even the Italian language appeared to have arisen as a new enemy to add to her confusion. She had not suffered under this handicap in France There, in a few seconds, she had been able to secure the obedience of a Parisian taximan. But the vocal sounds that came to her now from this new Babel were as

meaningless as though they had emanated from monkeys.

And even suppose she could have understood these sounds, and have produced them fluently herself? Would that man in the thick brown coat, for instance, do more than imagine she was a lunatic if she went up to him and said, "I have lost a friend on the train between Paris and Milan. It may be in France or Switzerland or Italy. All I know about him is his name, and I don't think even that is his real one. What should I do?"

The man in the thick brown coat moved, giving her a glimpse of somebody standing by his side. She caught her breath, and the platform began to turn somersaults.

CHAPTER XII

" DAVIS'S LUCK "

JOHN owed his life to two circumstances. The first was that, as he felt himself flying suddenly through the air he managed to catch hold of some part of the train—he never identified the part—to break his fall; and the second was that, when he did fall, he tumbled into a patch of very thick, deep grass that held him for a split second and then poured him into more grass and down a soft embankment. As he rolled, hugging his senses desperately, he had a faint vision of the train's lights disappearing like a maddened, illuminated, revolving snake in the distance above him.

He went on rolling. He wondered dizzily whether he would ever stop. Presently he discovered that he had stopped, though he had no recollection of the moment when he had ceased his whirling descent. His head was still whirling, and he had a nasty, jabbing pain in his side.

He managed to sit up. He performed the operation with difficulty. His eyes gradually grew accustomed to the darkness, and he found he was on the side of a road. In the great spaces around him black shapes loomed, giving him the grotesque sense that he was in the bottom of a vast cup with a jagged, broken rim. Actually he was in a valley surrounded by sleeping mountains.

The pain in his side continued to jab, but returning memory jabbed far more disastrously. He thought of the girl he had left in the train, and the

Menace that had placed him there. He went through a period of agony blacker than the mountains. He tried to rise, but the effort toppled him over, and he found himself flat on the road again.

"Never mind!" he thought. "I'll get up next time . . . got to get to Milan. . . ."

Somewhere in the distance a ray of light swept into view. It vanished. Appeared again. Faded to a faint glow. Augmented to a brilliant beam. Became two large, glaring, blinding eyes that bore down upon him.

"Got to get to Milan!" he muttered. "Just hang on to that . . . Milan. . . ."

The two eyes went out suddenly. And suddenly he shouted, appealing to God, "I've *got* to get to Milan!"

"Well, I know that," said a voice by his side. "And you're going there, aren't you?"

He was moving again. Rushing through the blackness. He was on the train once more! How had he got back? And why was he on the cow-catcher? It must be the cow-catcher because he could see the illuminated track ahead. . . . Yes, but wait a moment! Where were the railway lines? It wasn't a track. It was a road.

He kept very still for a few seconds. His brain was buzzing, and he had to steady himself. Then he turned his head, and saw the man who had answered him. A big, well-built fellow in a thick coat and goggles, and with his hands on the driving-wheel of a car. Of course—this was a car. And, by Jove, it was *going*!

He studied the man quietly, while the buzzing grew less. He wondered whether he were friend or foe? If the latter, it was a pity he looked so

muscular. John himself was pretty useful, but he wasn't feeling at his best at the moment.

"What's happening?" he murmured.

"No good asking me," replied the driver. "Shut up. Plenty of time to talk."

The voice was reassuring.

"I'm all right," said John.

"So's my ghost," agreed the driver. "You've had a knock."

"I suppose you found me in the road?"

"Sure."

"I remember your lights."

"It was damn close to being the last thing you ever remembered! I nearly ran you over. You were babbling about Milan and a girl, so I thought we might make a start."

"I—see."

"So do I. I see you're green. Shut up, or you'll get another knock."

John smiled faintly and relapsed into silence. This seemed like a good chap. They remained silent for five minutes while the car sped forward at hazardous speed.

"Are you rather a sport, by any chance?" inquired John, breaking the silence.

"Not particularly," returned the driver. "But sport's my trade, so I'm always ready for a race. Especially," he added, "if it's a good one."

"This is a good one," answered John. "You've got to beat a train."

"Easy," smiled the driver. "Can that train do ninety?" The car appeared to be quite capable of it. "I suppose the girl's on the train."

"Yes. And so was I."

"Oh! What made you drop off?"

" You've said it. I did drop off. Or rather, I was dropped off."

" Serious ? "

" Never more."

After a little pause, during which the car accelerated, the driver asked :

" Girl in danger ? "

" Dire."

" Splendid. We'll win."

Roads born mysteriously out of the blackness lived vividly for a moment and vanished. The faint outlines of the mountains changed and reformed, slipping imperceptibly backwards. Hairpin bends were rounded with perilous skill. As they rounded one, unseen water rushed beneath them.

" You know these roads ? " asked John.

" Like a book," answered the driver.

" Haven't you got a home ? "

" Yes. Any car."

" You spend your life in them ? "

" Pretty well."

" Would I know your name ? "

" Not unless you're in the trade. It isn't Campbell. I'll try you. Davis."

John shook his head.

" There you are ! " grumbled the driver humorously. " We get all the qualms and none of the kudos ! But it's fun. I test cars. I'm testing this one. Special night test."

" It seems to be standing the test," commented John.

" Not too bad," nodded Davis. " This hill's one in six. She's taking it like a bird. I'm not changing down. If we beat your train we'll have it in the papers."

" No, thanks——"

"Yes, thanks! Across Switzerland in three minutes seventeen seconds. Used so-and-so oil. So-and-so tyres. So-and-so car. So-and-so lights. Did you ever see such lights? They're what I'm testing chiefly to-night. Aren't they lovely? Aren't they sweet? When we turn into Italy, they'll light up the boot at the bottom! Oh, by the way," he interrupted his enthusiasm, "how about your papers and so forth? Did they drop out of the train with you? All in order for these continental curiosity-mongers?"

John clapped his hand suddenly to his pocket, then gave a sigh of relief.

"Yes, I've got them," he answered. "And thanks for not being a curiosity-monger yourself."

"Yes, I think I'm doing pretty well," smiled Davis. "For all I know, you and your girl friend may be escaped murderers. By the way, I see there's another body worrying Scotland Yard. Found in a front garden or somewhere. Well, why worry? We've all got to die somehow. I hope I die in harness. Anything the matter?"

"No," replied John. "But I'd like you to do me still another favour. Advertise your oil and your tyres and your car and your lights—but don't advertise *me*! Even though I don't happen to be a murderer—or do you think I am?"

Davis laughed.

"Don't be a ruddy fool!" he exclaimed.

"Just the same, I don't want publicity," said John.

"P'r'aps you're *after* a murderer?"

"Not that, either. Can I have your promise?"

"Sure! Why not? I won't even tell my carburettor, in case it passes the news on to the cylinders. I'm travelling alone—like the fellow in

Noel Coward's song. And now will you do *me* a favour?"

"If I can."

"Oh, you can. What's this girl like?"

But John shook his head. He was quite sure he could not paint the picture.

"You're wrong—I can't," he answered. "If I could, I wouldn't. The description would dazzle you and make you run into something."

"Bad as that!" commented Davis. "Well, perhaps you're right, though I once sat opposite Tallulah Bankhead without winking. Now we'll stop conversation for a bit. You want to rest, and I want to make this bus move."

"What's she doing now, then?"

"Just crawling. Watch her rip!"

John closed his eyes. He was glad to do so, for the talk had tired him, and he wanted to think. But his thoughts tortured him, and finding they brought no relief he reversed his policy and decided not to think. All that could be done was being done; far more than at one time had seemed possible; and to brood over his fears for Vera served no purpose and merely sapped his reserves of strength. The pain in his side, though decreasing, was troublesome. Heaven knew what problems lay ahead of him, and how much effort and fortitude he would require to solve them. He would solve them better if he took full advantage of this temporary respite, and made his mind a blank.

So he permitted his drowsiness to possess him, confident that his companion would rouse him when it became necessary, and slipped into a state of suspended nightmare.

It was a strange journey, though stranger ones were to follow it. It was punctured by little halts

and periodic interviews with nocturnal officials. Each halt and interview was short—Davis saw to that—and was wiped out by the darkness that succeeded it, leaving only a shadowy memory. The longest halt John knew nothing about. He was sleeping so soundly at that period that he did not even hear the tyre burst, or Davis swear. While Davis jacked up the car and fixed on the spare, he glanced with surprise and sympathy at his slumbering passenger. “God, that chap’s done!” he muttered. “I’ve just *got* to make it!”

A few miles away to his right, luck was favouring him. A goods train had left the line and overturned. But he did not know this, or that the train he was racing was waiting, with the signal against it, till the track could be cleared.

The spare wheel was fixed. On again, through the rushing night. John stirred.

“Eh? Anything happened?” he muttered sleepily.

“No—all serene,” answered Davis. “Go to sleep again. Mother’s watching you.”

John was already asleep again. He had not opened his eyes or heard Davis’s reply.

The night passed. The brilliant headlights paled as the blackness thinned into grey. The grey became pink, then yellow. The sun rose out of the jagged horizon, transforming great shadows into solid shapes, and theories into realities. The world around them was blue and white and gold.

But Davis’s heart was gloomy. He was making a stupendous effort—for adventure this time, not advertisement—and he knew he was behind his time. In the trade there was a queer thing known as Davis’s Luck. Somehow or other, he always got the goods. That was one reason why he was never

out of a job. He never left the issue to luck, but he counted on its assistance. This time, however, it appeared to have deserted him. Not even Mussolini—they had crossed the south-west corner of Switzerland, and were in Italy now—could put the clock back!

"Where are we?"

John shot the question out suddenly.

"Somewhere in Europe," grunted Davis. "We're getting there."

"But what's the time?"

Davis did not answer. John glanced at his wrist-watch. His spirit sank. Within five minutes the Brindisi train should be drawing into Milan.

"How much to go?" he asked.

"Oh—about a hundred and fifty," answered Davis.

"And five minutes to do it in!"

"Easy! That's only 1,800 m.p.h.!"

"We've lost, Davis," said John.

"We haven't," retorted Davis. "I've never lost a race yet!"

John regarded him with grudging admiration.

"That's the right spirit," he remarked, "but how do you propose to do a hundred and fifty miles in five minutes?"

"I don't propose to do a hundred and fifty miles in five minutes," answered Davis. "I propose to beat that train. Somehow. Didn't I tell you, I'm lucky money?" He added, "Anyway, it won't help us to stop. We'll carry on."

Luck can be assisted by holding on long enough for it to turn up. That was Davis's philosophy. If he had hung over a precipice, he would have hung on till a net weaved itself to receive his body, and he would not have weakened himself meanwhile by

worrying how the miracle was going to be worked. By this rule he should not have worried over the trifile of covering 150 miles in five minutes. That he did so was due to the fact that, on this occasion, the issue did not affect his own destiny. It affected the destiny of the man beside him, and—more important—of a girl. A girl, apparently, whose beauty was beyond description.

Davis had a weakness for girls. They were the reason he remained a bachelor.

But a few miles later he was swearing at himself for his pessimism. In the middle of more bad luck he struck the good luck. It was at a filling station, during another exasperating halt.

The lanky, leisurely, open-shirted individual who supplied the juice with irritating slowness was conversational. He referred to the fine morning. Who cared a farthing about the fine morning? He referred to yesterday's speech by the great Duce. Who cared a button about speeches? He referred to the crops. Who cared a damn about the crops? He referred to a derailed goods train that had held up traffic on the main line. Who cares a——?

"*What!*" shouted Davis.

He leapt from the car, seized the hose from the astonished man's hand, and thrust the end in the petrol-tank. He told the man meanwhile that, if he did not complete his job in three seconds, he would chop him into small bits. His tone was so convincing that the man believed him. There was no more conversation.

The car shot forward again with renewed hope. The speedometer rose from fifty to sixty, from sixty to seventy, from seventy to eighty. "Are there any traffic laws in Italy?" John wondered. But he did not voice his wonder. If traffic laws existed (and

many folk they passed seemed to think that they did), he had no more desire to adhere to them than had his companion who was breaking them.

Not a word was spoken during the last stage of that mad journey until within a few miles of their goal. Then a train whistle caused the strained expression of Davis to thaw into a grin.

"Recognise it?" he cackled.

"Suppose it *is*!" murmured John.

"It *is*!" replied Davis. "How do I know? I'll tell you. Davis's Luck!"

They had to slacken in the streets of Milan. After all, even Davis himself recognised that it was bad mathematics to run over ten people to save one, however pretty the one might be. But he proved himself as skilful a driver through thick traffic as round lonely hairpin bends, and they reached the station just as a train was drawing into it.

This time John's speed beat Davis's. He was out of the car before it had stopped, and jostling his way to the platform. The long train, gliding slowly, came to a smooth halt. He stood still, staring at doors and windows, feeling suddenly sick.

All at once he darted forward. Davis, who had reached his side, gazed over his receding shoulder towards the point that was attracting him.

"Whew!" murmured Davis. "So—that's the lady! Yes! . . . I understand!"

CHAPTER XIII

SOUTHWARD THROUGH ITALY

THE Brindisi express was on its way again, speeding south and attempting to make up its lost time. Seven or eight hours ahead lay Florence, waiting vividly for its brief moment before it, too, melted into a memory. In the journey of life there is no stopping.

Vera and John had related their stories and, seated once more in the dining-car, were now exchanging comments. Both looked a little the worse for wear, but both looked happy. At another table, a little way off, sat Hector Brent alone, watching them with quiet interest. They talked of him while he watched.

"White man, after all," said John.

"Very definitely white," answered Vera, mentally dismissing the offer Brent had made her during the first minutes of their conversation. She had not mentioned this offer to John.

"Good thing you went to him," continued John. "But what made you do it?"

"He said a few words to me after—after I left you last night. I told you."

"Oh, yes, so you did. Forgive me if I'm a bit woolly—my mind's still buzzing. But I remember predicting those few words! And I remember your leaving me last night!"

"I've got to explain that, John. . . ."

"Not now."

"Why not?"

"Do you want to? We've both got things to explain presently, but I vote we wait till—Khartoum?" He paused and regarded her quizzically. "Later, anyhow. We're going through some wonderful scenery. Don't let's waste it. I want to get back to where we were yesterday—the day before—don't ask me! Whenever it was!"

"You mean in London, when we just chatted about anything and listened to the music."

"That's it," he nodded. "When we were just little children—without an unpleasant fellow chasing us!" He frowned and, in spite of his desire to forget oppressions, dwelt on the unpleasant fellow.

"But he *was* following you even then, wasn't he?" asked Vera. "Or shouldn't I inquire?"

"I expect he was," replied John, "only I thought I'd shaken him off."

"He seems pretty hard to shake off. We thought we'd shaken him off in Paris."

"The important point is, have we shaken him off *now*? Look here, let's try and work out his movements."

"We'll miss the scenery," she smiled.

"Just for a mile or two. I want to get my mind tidy about that chap. When did *you* first see him? The first time ever?"

"Outside your rooms. In Craddock Street."

"When we arrived there in the taxi, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Was he there when you left?"

"I believe so."

"So do I. Because after you left I think he got in somehow or other—probably through a window—and poked around. Learned something. Yes, but how the devil did he get to Paris?" he broke off. "I'll swear he wasn't on the aeroplane! And if he

came by some other route, how did he beat us? And why didn't he tackle us earlier? At Le Bourget?"

"Perhaps he was at Le Bourget," suggested Vera, "and followed our taxi—"

"And then dismissed his own taxi and strolled down the street?" He shook his head. "Doesn't seem to fit, somehow. You see—" He stopped abruptly and gave a low whistle. "Got it!"

"Tell me!"

"Why—he *didn't* cross to Paris. He's still in London. But he sent a message to Paris—telephone or telegram—and this is *another* fellow, who's carrying on for him—another link in their confounded chain! These natives look very much alike to anybody but themselves. Same as Japs. Would you swear that the dark man you saw outside my rooms in Craddock Street was the same dark man you saw near the French tobacconist?"

"No—I wouldn't," answered Vera, after a moment's consideration.

"There you are! You merely recognised the breed! So we've cleared up that little mystery. Dark Man No. 1 still in London. Dark Man No. 2 picks up the threads in Paris. Tracks us. Is put off the scent by your clever trick. Smells the trick when he has lost us again. Perhaps he telephones to London, and Dark Man No. 1 tells him he is a blithering idiot and packs him off to the Gare de Lyon. Or perhaps he does it off his own bat. Anyhow, he turns up there, boards the train, tucks himself away, watches—and, when he gets his opportunity, jostles behind me and sends me out on to the line."

She shuddered.

"Don't worry," he smiled. "He didn't break any

bones. Now, then, what followed? Having—as he thought—got rid of me—he turned his attention to you. That must have puzzled him. You weren't a piece in the jigsaw—or, if you were, he didn't know where to fit you in. And he couldn't get into communication with headquarters for instructions. Yes, I can see that fellow's quandary, and his actions prove, I think, that he wasn't our original shadow who knew more about it. If he dealt with you as he had dealt with me, he might get into trouble. On the other hand, if he didn't deal with you somehow and keep you out of mischief till he got his new instructions, *you* might get *him* into trouble."

"Nothing would have given me greater pleasure!" remarked Vera.

"Exactly! So he decided not to give you the pleasure. He decided not to let you slip—to put you temporarily *hors de combat*. While you were asleep he gave you an injection of some sort—and he'd know a few sorts. Probably he hoped you'd stay asleep till he'd discovered what his next step was to be—or perhaps the next step was to kidnap you at Milan. . . . Whew, the brute!"

"Well, he didn't kidnap me. Go on."

"There isn't much more. He thinks his filthy dope is working, and gets the somewhat oriental idea of hiding himself in the bunk above you—"

"Wouldn't that be a pretty risky idea?"

"I don't know—for a man who was running risks anyway. No one but myself would visit that bunk, and I wasn't on the train to do it. It was a good hiding-place for him, and near his charge. Why, that rascal felt so safe that he even allowed himself to snatch some sleep—unless, of course, nature beat him and he dozed unintentionally."

Perhaps that's more likely. But falling asleep wasn't his only bad luck. His dope *didn't* work as it should have done. Before you went right off you had that short period you described as a waking dream, and it allowed you to get to Brent's compartment. . . . I'd rather like to erect a statue to Mr. Hector Brent."

"We'll do it as soon as we can get hold of some marble," replied Vera, "but meanwhile please go on! What did Dark Man No 2 do next?"

"He wasn't in the compartment when Brent visited it?"

"No"

"Then what he did next is pretty obvious. He woke up. He was waking up when you saw his hand come over the side. I say, that must have been a nasty moment!"

"The worst ever!"

"Oh, Lord! I wish—well, no good wishing. He woke up. He sat up. You had gone. He climbed down and dived into the corridor. Of course, all this is guessing, but it must be pretty near the mark. He heard somebody coming. Brent. He bunked. Then after Brent had gone, and you didn't return, he hid himself somewhere else till he could complete his get-away."

"You mean, at Milan?"

"No, before Milan. There was an accident on the line. Your train was held up——"

"Yes, so there was!" interrupted Vera, recollecting "Mr. Brent mentioned it."

"And that ends our little bit of reconstruction," said John, "and now we can look at the scenery."

But the scenery was not as attractive as it should have been. A dark man fitted through it like a following shadow, keeping pace with the train.

"I suppose you can't go on with your reconstruction," asked Vera, "and say what he did *after* he left?"

"That's not so easy," John admitted.

"Then I'll have a shot," she answered. "He thinks you're dead, and he knows I'm alive. He gets in touch with what you called headquarters, and reports."

"Yes—that's probable."

"And headquarters issues new instructions."

"Well done, Sherlock!"

"But now Sherlock needs your assistance! What are the new instructions?"

John thought for a moment. Then he said rather grimly:

"We may find that out at Brindisi."

"I'm not keen to wait, if we can find out before," she retorted. "And who *is* headquarters? I'm talking about headquarters, but I've no idea who headquarters may be—except that it isn't Dark Man No. 1." The photograph of the Sheik flashed into her mind. In saying she had no idea who headquarters was, she had not been quite truthful. "Anyhow," she went on, "I think I see one thing. There'll be a Dark Man No. 3 keeping his eyes skinned for me at Brindisi."

"Then we must keep our eyes skinned for Dark Man No. 3," replied John.

"Does that mean you agree with me?"

"It means—that I certainly think it possible. But don't forget they are not really after *you*. They are merely curious about you. I'm the one they are interested in, and they think they've given me my *quietus*—"

He looked at her suddenly. She read his thought, for it was also hers.

"Yes, it's a good thing we didn't become too absorbed in the scenery," she said. "We needed this conversation, John. They think they've accounted for you, but if they're going to watch me at Brindisi they'll find out that they *haven't* accounted for you! Unless—I leave the train alone."

"You're not going to do that!" he exclaimed determinedly. "Much too risky!"

"I do wish you'd make up your mind about me, John," she frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"At one moment I have brains and pluck, and at another I'm a sort of tender flower that has got to be kept under a glass case. After I got you out of that scrape in Paris, you said 'I'd do!' Now I can't walk across a station platform alone—"

"Not Brindisi platform," he interposed. "Paddington or Baker Street, by all means. I wonder—yes, here's an idea!—perhaps Brent would look after you while I do the vanishing trick? We change to the seaplane at Brindisi, and he's going on it. I could join you."

"Yes, and suppose you don't join us?" she answered. She did not add her thought, "Would that mean Johannesburg?"

"Don't worry—I'll join you," he replied. "Something's looking after me. . . . And now I vote we really *do* stop talking shop and look at the scenery!"

This time they succeeded in their resolution, and when their meal was over and they were back in their compartment watching the Italian panorama under a perfect southern sky, Vera could hardly believe that within this small space, only a few hours previously, she had endured stark horror. It is one of the miracles of life that each successive stage

wipes out the stage that preceded it. In joy we forget pain, and during agony we strive to recall the vividness of joy and to be comforted by the thin memory of it.

Now the joy reigned. It was the memory of unhappiness that formed the thin veil of the past. Behind the recent horror, which had become temporarily uncoupled from its association with the future, lay sordid little memories that appeared to have been completed and to have no part in the time to come. Mr. Menzies, that pathetic, elderly sensualist—had he ever really kissed the back of Vera's neck? And had he called afterwards with his apologia, and his mumblings about his wife? Other employers, who had watched her covertly, or with impudent frankness, while she worked—had they ever formed real, solid oppressions, to drive her eventually to seek other employers still, with the same disturbing results? Mrs. Thurston—good-natured, narrow, anxious, hard-working mortal, with her limited aspect and dreary walled-in future—was she still toiling and slaving, mounting stairs asthmatically, making beds, dusting rooms, cooking, just so she could make both ends meet, while here lay this glowing land beyond her comprehension? Poor Mrs. Thurston, and countless thousands of others like her!

Yet there was one corner in Mrs. Thurston's house that stood out from all these vague recollections with peculiar distinctness. It was the corner of the bathroom from the ceiling of which depended the waving cobweb. Vera discovered within herself a ridiculous and wholly incomprehensible affection for the cobweb, and wondered whether any other eyes had ever taken any personal interest in it—saving as a vaguely annoying sight to be swept away one day

when there was sufficient energy to reach so high—and whether any other lips had breathed it consciously into movement! It was at this outrageous symbol of neglected duty that Vera had stared while warm water had purred around her and she had made her great decision. . . . And now here she was, thinking about it, while a train bore her southwards through Italy, farther and farther away. . . .

Her companion, watching her silently, speculated wrongly on the subject of her thoughts.

The hours slipped by. The afternoon shadows lengthened. Tea broke into the pleasant, languorous monotony; and the pleasant, languorous monotony was resumed afterwards. No word was spoken to disturb it. No incident occurred to cause them to break their truce.

"Fired?" John asked once.

She shook her head. The little curl protested for a moment, then went back into its position.

"Bored?"

"How could one be?"

"I agree. This is restful. Just what we both need."

He looked at the little curl. He wondered why, since it had helped her to so much trouble, she did not excommunicate it. Was it her submission to herself, or was it her defiance? Suddenly finding that the curl was intruding on his rest, he closed his eyes to shut it out.

In another compartment another man was also trying to shut it out. Hector Brent had met many women, and made no attempt to conceal the fact that he intended to meet many more. Like Omar Khayyám he firmly believed that the only way to equalise with death was to enjoy the life that

preceded extinction ; he accepted no philosophy that denied the complete taste of fruit. But he had never dulled his senses by over-indulgence, or cheapened his appetite by indiscrimination, and his faculty for selection was as keen as it ever was. Thus he recognised in Vera a special quality that he had never met before, and that could not be enjoyed by the ordinary, conventional methods of capture. In this too-attractive woman beauty was engaged in civil warfare. It should have blazoned itself, or crept back timidly into its shell. Instead, it held out both hands—and then, if you tried to take the hands, they snatched themselves away, or slapped your face !

That was Brent's second reading of Vera. His first, he frankly admitted, had been wrong. Now he longed for a third, at closer quarters.

But he made no plans. His assistance had been genuine, and had been given without any ulterior motive. " If I profit by what I have done," he thought, " and if this most charming young person turns to me in some new difficulty before our paths separate, I shall take my winnings. But there won't be any winnings if I snatch."

So he tried to put the charming young person out of his mind, and ruefully confessed that he was making a very bad job of it.

CHAPTER XIV

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

THE journey to Khartoum was nearly over. Florence by sunset—Brindisi by sunrise—Athens blue and white in the blazing noon—Alexandria in evening shadows, with a real bed in a real hotel that had to be left too soon—Cairo through tantalising darkness—Assiut, Assuan and Luxor as the sun mounted over the parched desert, now stretched endlessly below, now obliterated by a white carpet of clouds—all came and went in thrilling, unbelievable procession, making a strange confusion of the mind. And now, in another short breathless space, Khartoum would be reached, and two passengers would be deposited on the ground to face fresh adventure.

"Well," said one of the passengers suddenly. "We can't put it off much longer!"

"I'm ready to talk shop again, the moment you are," answered the other passenger.

"Right," replied John. "I think now's the moment. When we get down to earth things may start happening again, and we ought to decide in advance what we're going to do."

Nothing had happened, in the sense he implied, for over two days. There had been no sign of danger at Brindisi, and to Vera's relief it had not been necessary, after all, to solicit Hector Brent's further assistance and increase her obligation to him. Indeed, Brent had been markedly unobtrusive during the trip, and had withdrawn into his shell

very definitely. At Khartoum they would leave him, and he would travel on to Johannesburg alone. . . . Nor had there been any trouble at any of the other halting places, though at the hotel at Alexandria Vera had developed nerves and, hatching dark men out of her imagination, had locked herself in her bedroom until she had been called to resume the journey.

John's words, however, now suggested that their respite was at an end, and her heart quickened as she waited to hear what more he had to say.

"Shall we go on from where we left off before I was pitched out of the train?" he asked after a pause.

"You mean when I made a fool of myself?" she murmured.

"Please forget that. Anyway, you didn't make a fool of yourself. The point is that we were about to smash down the wall you said was between us, and as we didn't smash it down then, we're going to now."

"It's what I want."

"Not more than I do, Vera. Well—I asked you a question."

"About Mr. Menzies."

"I asked when you last saw him?"

"Yes. And now I'll give you a proper answer. It was in the afternoon before our evening at the Grosvenor—and at the Grosvenor, you remember, I told you all about it."

"My God—is that true?" he exclaimed. "Was that the last time?"

The relief in his tone, as well as his words, puzzled her.

"Of course," she answered. "Why is it so important?"

" Then you don't know that he visited your house late that night ? "

She flushed.

" Yes, I do know it," she said, " but I didn't see him. And I don't see how *you* know ! "

" I'll come to that in a minute," he replied quickly. " First tell me, please, how *you* know, since you didn't see him ? "

" He left a note."

" And you found it when you got back from my rooms ? "

" Yes."

" What was in the note ? "

" Oh, just some nonsense."

" Vera—this is vital ! I wouldn't ask unless——"

" I know you wouldn't. But—it *was* nonsense ! He said—he said he'd had a row with his wife about me. She'd been spying on him—oh, John, it's all so sordid ! "

" Beastly ! But I must have it. Go on. There'd been a row ? Yes ? "

" A pretty bad one, evidently. It began when he got home, after seeing me in the afternoon. It went on all the evening. At last—so his letter said—he left the house in desperation and came to see me. I think he was in an awful state. Yes, he said that in his letter, too. But, of course, I was with you, John, so he missed me."

" And he left before you returned, you say."

" My dear, would he have written the note otherwise ? " asked Vera with a smile.

" Touché ! Sorry ! My mind's falling over itself. Was there anything else of importance in the note ? "

" Oh, no ! Nothing at all ! He just wanted me to be his mistress, if he couldn't square things with his wife——"

"The bounder!" muttered John.

"That's rather what I felt at the time," she responded, "but now I can only feel sorry for him. He really is rather a pathetic creature, John."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he answered, with an odd note in his voice. "And I retract my word 'bounder.' Vera, have you still got that note?"

She shook her head.

"Do you know where it is?"

"Somewhere in France. In very small pieces. I found I had it on me in the first aeroplane, and tore it up and got rid of it. I thought you saw me."

"I remember. Just after we'd crossed the channel. . . . I wish to God I'd known!"

His voice suddenly chilled her. She sat very still, and felt as though a cold shadow were slowly creeping over her body.

"Tell me, Vera," he said. "Do you happen to know what time you got back from my rooms?"

"No," she replied. "But I know the time when I left your rooms."

"What time was it?"

"2.18."

"What!"

"That's right, John."

"But--don't you mean 1.18?"

"No." I glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece just before I went away. I know I'm not mistaken, because it gave me a start. I'd had no idea it was so late."

He looked at her searchingly.

"There's something I don't understand here," he said. "If I remember rightly, it was round about 1 o'clock when you left me."

"When you thought I left you," she corrected.
"But I waited. I waited an hour."

"Why?"

"I wanted to be quite sure you were all right. Please don't look at me as if you expected to see little wings sprouting. It was a very ordinary thing to do—and I didn't know then that you had such a wonderful capacity for getting over bumps!"

He did not answer for a few moments. He stared down in to the desert-brown distance. Then he said:

"I made a lucky shot, Vera, when I came and sat at your table. I hope your own shot will be as lucky—and perhaps—" He broke off with a sudden little groan. "Yes, but who could prove you left my rooms at that hour? And the letter's gone! I'm the only one who could prove it—and you've just had to tell even me!"

"Now John," answered Vera, steeling herself, "it's time for you to tell me something. Or can I make it easier for you by guessing? Is Mr. Menzies—dead?"

He nodded. The cold shadow enveloped her. But she remained perfectly calm.

"Have you known all along?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"At Croydon?"

"I was just reading about it when you joined me. That was one reason why I didn't protest more."

"Protest?"

"At your madness in coming on this trip."

"I see." She stared at the toe of her shoe. "Perhaps—you didn't think it *was* madness?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure what I thought," he said. "There wasn't much time, you know. But I didn't regard you as a possible murderer, if that's in your mind—"

"Though I might have killed Mr. Menzies accidentally—in defence of my honour—and then got the wind up?"

"Exactly. And, if that was so, I could hardly turn you back again."

"No, John," she agreed. "But I'd have been a pretty cool customer, to have acted and behaved as I did."

"It was because you acted and behaved as you did that I acted and behaved as *I* did!" he returned.

"Long before we reached Paris I knew you'd had nothing whatever to do with it."

"Didn't you think of mentioning it to me in Paris?"

He smiled grimly.

"You may remember, we had rather a busy time there. And afterwards, for that matter. But if I *had* mentioned it in Paris, what would you have done?"

"It might have depended on the details—which at the present I don't know," she reminded him.

"All I know is that Mr. Menzies is dead—and that I am talking about it quite callously, as though he were a person I had never met."

"Well don't worry about the callousness," he answered. "Hold on to it. Emotion gets you in irons sometimes—it's possible to be numb at your own mother's funeral. Once I looked at a dead woman—she'd been dancing only a few seconds before—" He pulled himself up with a frown. "Yes—the details. Well, Vera, here they are. Mr. Menzies was found in the kitchen area of your house by the early morning milkman. He had a crack on the skull, and he was stone dead."

He paused and looked at her. She knew what he was thinking. There was one question he had not asked.

"I left the house at six," she said, answering the question. "Before the milkman came."

She could not repress a little shudder as she realised what she had unconsciously walked by. Within a few feet of her as she had let herself out of the front door lay a man to whom she was about to post a letter. She recalled the letter with a jerk. . . .

"An hour before the milkman came," John was saying. "He made the discovery at about seven. He reported the matter at once. The police arrived, and concluded that Menzies had lain there for five hours."

Five hours! Vera shuddered again. He had been there when she had entered the house, and while she had read his letter, and replied to it, and waited. . . .

"How did they know he had been there five hours?" she asked.

"By his watch," replied John. "It was smashed, and the hands pointed to 1.53. Of course," he added, reflectively, "a murderer has tinkered before now with a watch, but the evidence is regarded as pretty conclusive. The doctor at the inquest agreed with it, anyway."

"There's been an inquest, then?"

"Yes. Adjourned."

"To—to find—the murderer?"

"Not necessarily. To find more particulars. There's no proof yet that it wasn't just an accident. It came out that Menzies was in a pretty rocky state when he left his house for the last time, and he might have staggered and fallen down the area without assistance. That would account for the crack on his skull. Vera, can you stand all these details, now we're having them?"

"Of course. We've got to have them, haven't we?"

" That's true. Just the same, you're taking them pretty splendidly . . . Mrs. Menzies was in a rocky state, too, while giving her evidence, and but for her the theory of accidental death might have been accepted. She became hysterical. Then—so I understand—rather unpleasantly calm. She threw out hints, and wanted the police to increase their efforts to trace a certain young lady who had left the house in the garden of which her husband had been found—shortly before the arrival of the milkman."

" That means, I suppose, I'm—wanted by the police ! " murmured Vera, feeling suddenly sick.

" Don't put it like that," he answered. " The police have searched your room, and are anxious to interview you."

" Isn't that the same thing ? " Vera had often read that phrase, and knew where it usually led. She felt the protective numbness slipping from her, and tried hard to regain it. " Did you say they searched my room ? "

" Yes. That was obvious procedure. Good Lord, Vera—what's the matter ? Surely there wasn't anything——!"

" I—don't know." She took a breath to steady herself. " There's one thing I forgot to tell you, John. Before I left the house I wrote two letters. One was for Mrs. Thurston—the landlady—and the other to Mr. Menzies."

" But there wasn't anything incriminating in them, was there ? " he exclaimed. " Nonsense, there couldn't have been ! "

" Oh, no ! "

" Well then ! I expect the police have seen those letters, and the one to Menzies—by the way, where did you address it ? "

" To his office."

" Can you recall what you said in it ? "

" I told him there could be no object in our meeting, as he suggested, or ever seeing each other again."

" All that's in your favour, Vera ! Why should you write to a man you knew was dead ? "

" I can think of a reason."

" Yes, so can I," he grunted, following her mind. " To try to establish the fact that you *didn't* know he was dead. . . . My God, I'm talking as though you actually killed the fellow ! Anyhow, if that letter isn't definite evidence for you, it isn't evidence against you, so you needn't worry about it."

" I wasn't worrying about it," she replied, gravely. " That letter was in the post, so the police wouldn't have found it in my room. But they must have found the ashes of the *first* letter I wrote to Mr. Menzies—one I burned because it was wild and hysterical—and that contained the sentence, ' I have no intention of staying here to be insulted, and possibly murdered ! ' I remember it because I was appalled after I had written it. Suppose all the words weren't completely burned ? "

" It would be inconvenient," answered John, after a pause, " but it wouldn't be vital evidence. Anyhow, I've come across no mention of it."

" No, I don't expect the police *would* mention it," said Vera. " And there's one thing *you* haven't mentioned—how have you come across all you know ? "

He smiled.

" Well, I'm a better linguist than you are Vera," he said. " You only speak French, but there are nearly a dozen languages I can plough through. And I've been ploughing through them in newspapers all along the route. I also got through to

London on the long-distance from Brindisi. Yes, with your business and mine, Vera, I've been fairly busy ! But now its my turn to put a question again. If I *had* been more communicative—if I *had* told you in Paris, say, all I knew—would you have gone back ? ”

She considered the question for a full minute, then gave it up.

“ I don't know,” she admitted. “ One only knows what happens—never what might have happened.”

“ Well, I didn't know either,” he answered. “ And—and I was mortally afraid that you would go back ”

For the first time in her experience of him he looked a trifle sheepish. She might have spared him, but the woman in her refused. Or perhaps it was the child in her, needing a little comfort from the storm.

“ Why were you afraid ? ” she inquired.

“ I thought you might run into danger.”

“ Just that ? ”

He saw through her game, and joined it.

“ Fishing ? ” he asked.

“ Obviously ! ”

“ I'll bite. I didn't know what the hell I'd do without you ! ”

The next moment he half-recanted. The game had threatened in an instant to become too serious.

“ But that doesn't mean I know what to do *with* you,” he said, with a short laugh, “ and, don't forget, that was only one of my reasons. Well—how do we stand ? When we descend at Khartoum, which I believe I can see in the distance, do you want to go home again or not ? What's in your mind ? ”

“ What's in yours ? ” she countered. “ If you

don't know what the hell to do with me, perhaps you'll give me a job?"

"It would be running from one danger into another."

"Do you see a third alternative?"

"Unfortunately, I don't"

Vera did. The third alternative was Johannesburg, and the companionship and security of a courteous, middle-aged amorist. She wondered what John would have thought had he known of the third alternative!

"Well in that case I suppose I must choose the most attractive danger," she observed, ignoring the third way out, "and I see nothing attractive in a police court. So now I apply definitely, John, for the job. My sole qualification is faith. I claim that, as I've no idea what the job entails"

The dot that was Khartoum began to expand in the distance below them. Soon they would leave the sky and glide down into the dot, to become enveloped in its walls and roofs and sand.

"Applicant still waiting," said Vera.

"Eh? Sorry!" answered John. "Yes, I—I expect you'll get the job, Vera. But I can't tell you quite definitely until to night."

CHAPTER XV

KHARTOUM

MATERIAL things have no significance until we attach our individual point of view to them, and if there were no mental or spiritual angle from which they were viewed they could hardly be said to exist at all. It is the way we see life, not life itself, that provides its meaning, its motives, and its incentives. The knife with which you once cut your wedding-cake will bring you happy memories. If some one beside you has plunged it into a human heart, it will bring your companion a horror of which you may be entirely ignorant. No single thing is precisely the same to any two people. Its facets are infinite.

Thus Khartoum, which presents different facets to the native, the sight-seer, the soldier, the historian, and the schoolboy struggling with dates, meant something completely different to Vera Wray. It meant a small room that was reached via a small door in a narrow, tortuous, dingy street—the room to which John quickly conducted her as soon as they descended from the sky, and in which, sitting beside the sole illumination of a flickering candle, she now awaited him. She had already passed through many adventures, and the day when she had escaped from the office of Mr Menzies seemed very far off, yet she always felt that her real adventures began in this room, and that all the incidents preceding her knowledge of it were thin

and, by comparison, insignificant Almost two-dimensional

Khartoum had lain ahead of her as a concrete goal Now she had no idea whatever of what lay ahead of her, or in what direction lay her next point This gloomy, flickering room formed a new frontispiece to her adventure, and the future was obscured in a mist of desert sand

She strove hard as the long minutes dragged by, not to develop nerves John had promised to return, if possible, within an hour and she had now waited two There was nothing to do but to go on waiting because she had promised solemnly that she would not leave the room But suppose two hours became three, and the three four? Suppose

"Shut up!" she said to her thoughts "He'll come back presently Do you want him to find you a rag?"

It would have helped her resist more the vast oppression if the room had been larger Its close walls pressed in upon her after the limitless freedom of the skies The strange sounds seemed also to be conspiring against her spirit and to be weaving a net round it The occasional voices in the narrow street outside did not belong to her own world That queer little cough of a passer-by people did not cough like this in England English footsteps sounded different as they approached and faded away The distant hum of London traffic had no connection with this hum of the East And did English candles flicker quite so persistently, and produce such fantastic shadows on the walls?

"I thought I told you to shut up!" she exclaimed angrily

Her voice boomed through the room She called herself an idiot for having spoken her thoughts aloud

The candle nearly went out. She moved it farther from the cracked window. For comfort she imagined herself sitting in a London theatre, in her filmy evening dress, watching a modern comedy; with familiar buses and taxis passing outside, and paper-boys calling the latest news.

"Paiper! Paiper! Closing scores! Front Garden Murder! Police find a clue!"

She jumped up. At first she thought it was the imaginary paper boy who had brought her to her feet. Then she realised it was somebody closer. Somebody who had been coming along the street unnoticed while her thoughts had been in London, and whose footsteps now fell abruptly on her ears, and as abruptly stopped. Stopped just outside the cracked window.

Well, why shouldn't somebody stop? There was nothing sinister in that! You stopped to light a cigarette, didn't you? — or to tie a shoe-lace, or scratch your nose? Any old thing! Or this might be John himself? No, not John. John wouldn't stop!

In disobedience to strict orders she crept to the window and peered out cautiously. There was a limit to obedience, even when the orders were given by John. She would burst if she did not get a peep at the individual who had stopped beneath her window and who refused to come in, or to go on again! She looked down on the top of a head. A moment later the head looked up. She found herself staring at Hector Brent.

He saw the relief as well as the surprise in her eyes, and it settled his doubts.

"Can I come in?" he called, softly.

She nodded, and ran down the straight, dark staircase that descended direct to the street. She opened

"I thought you weren't going to ask any questions!"

"We often think things that do not happen. You don't know where he has gone?"

"No."

"Which means that, if he does not come back, you won't know where to look for him?"

"But of course he'll come back!" she exclaimed. Then suddenly her heart missed a beat. "You—you haven't come to tell me——"

He reassured her quickly

"I haven't come to tell you anything," he said. "My ignorance of your friend is as colossal as your own. Like you, I expect he *will* come back. He strikes me, from my observation of him, as the kind of man who achieves what he sets out to do. In fact, my dear Miss Wray, if he were any other type of man, I should commit the enormity of kidnapping you and taking you to Johannesburg without the slightest compunction! But even your strong men hit a wall sometimes, and if your own strong man hits that wall, I really don't see why you should continue the risk of hitting a wall yourself. So——"

He paused, and smiled.

"So—what?" she asked

"The answer is obvious," he returned. "I shall wait here till your friend does return—just in case, to use an Irishism, he doesn't. I hope he will return before 6.45 a.m. to-morrow," he added, with a wry grimace, "or I shall be late in Johannesburg—and maybe another scandal will follow me there when I do turn up. Of course, we might avoid that by finding some ancient one-eyed hag to sit here and chaperone us at twenty piastres an hour."

The sparsely-furnished room contained an old

chair and a rickety table. He sat down carefully on the table.

"I think you're the—kindest friend I've ever had," murmured Vera.

"I am not in the least kind," he replied. "Although I am getting no reward for all the trouble you are putting me to, any psycho-analyst would prove to you that my interest is merely physical."

"Perhaps that makes you all the kinder?"

As she sat down in the chair and regarded his immaculate form, she wondered what life would really be like with him, and whether, in another mood—or with a different philosophy—she might have accepted his original offer to accompany him to South Africa. He had told her that his "other women" had been quite happy, and she did not disbelieve him. She was sure he would always be considerate, courteous, and generous. Probably, when he had finished with them—or they with him—he provided for them until their next adventure. And so his life went on, and theirs. . . .

But he had a longer span of adventure than they. Unless they found security, their adventures would end too soon in disappointment and disillusion. Even Vera's beauty, which seemed so eternal as it glowed in this shabby little room, would presently lose its power to disturb men's sleep and interfere with their normal routines. When she was forty, men of forty would be knights-errant to girls of twenty. Beauty was a dangerous ship unless it rode into some harbour and found safe anchorage.

"I'd give a lot to know what you've been thinking of all this time," came Hector Brent's voice suddenly.

"I was thinking of you," answered Vera. "And your life."

"I was rather afraid that was it," he replied.

"Why afraid?"

"Your expression wasn't entirely complimentary. Well—I wouldn't worry about it. My life isn't yours, and ~~it's~~ yours we're concerned about at this moment."

"Perhaps I'm concerned about *yours*, at this moment."

He raised his eyebrows.

"My dear young lady," he said, "you don't contemplate trying to reform me?"

"Of course not! Reformation doesn't come into it. You're living the life you've got to live, and I was just wondering whether it was a happy life—that's all."

"I see. Well, I've no complaints."

"And the others?"

"Why so interested?"

"I'm trying to imagine myself one of the others."

"That's a frank statement," he smiled, "and might be dangerous. But I won't take advantage of it. I can only recall one of the others who complained—and even she was all smiles when I altered a figure on a cheque."

"You don't mind if I say that sounds perfectly hateful?"

"Not in the least. I thought it rather hateful myself."

"Then why did you alter the cheque?"

"She took a risk in life with me. I wanted to be sure I had covered it."

"That was decent of you."

"Thank you."

"But can a cheque cover the risk?"

"In her case it did. In your case it couldn't. But even you have a right to—" He paused, and removed his eyes from her to the window.

" I'd like you to finish that sentence," she begged.

" You've a right to some sort of a reward," he answered. " For the risk *you* are taking."

She was glad his eyes were on the window. He did not see her flush.

" Do you think I am working for a reward ? " she asked.

" Of course you are—subconsciously, if not consciously," he replied. " There's something you want more than anything else in the world. You may or you may not know what it is. It isn't a cheque. But you're working for it. In company with both saints and sinners."

" I'm not a saint ! "

" If you had been, you wouldn't have gained my interest. But you're not a sinner either. There's the rub. If you'll take the advice of one who is a sinner—find out as quickly as you can what you are, and be it—find out as quickly as you can what you want, and go for it. Don't waste time. Life's short—and full of pitfalls for the vacillating."

His voice had become abruptly serious. Now he turned back from the window and looked at her full in the face as the shadows flickered around her and played in her hair.

" Do you realise this ? You draw the best and the worst out of a man. You're not only dangerous to yourself—you're dangerous to others. Desperately dangerous. You've the power to lift a man to Olympus or drag him down to the devil. Realise it ! Remember it. *Know* it ! "

His sudden transition from protective polish to crude reality gave her a moment of breathlessness. She felt as though she were meeting him, actually, for the first time. But it was not only his manner that hit her ; it was his message. John had given

her the same message, in a different form and environment, at their original luncheon, and it had lain at the back of her mind and her actions ever since. The recently learned news of Mr. Menzies' death had revived it tragically. Now Brent's words emphasised it from yet another source, weighing her down with an almost frightening sense of personal responsibility.

Was she responsible for her troubles? More disturbingly followed the question—was she responsible for other people's? For the death of Mr. Menzies? For the danger that threatened John, and that was even now detaining him? "No, that existed before we met," she thought, seeking extenuation. But she must have increased that danger, and hampered his free movements. At this very moment he might have found himself in some new dilemma in which she formed his sole perplexity.

She had been staring through Hector Brent while these thoughts raced through her mind. Now her focus shortened, and she stared at him. He was watching her closely. He seemed immeasurably strong, and there was a comforting definiteness about him. He was like solid ground in the midst of shifting sand. He had worked out life for himself, and he faced the answer. She could warm him with her beauty but she could not scorch him. He was safe from her. . . .

"I've worried you more than I meant to," he said. "I'm sorry."

"No, you've been right," she answered. "I need to hear what you've just said over and over again!"

"If you're conscious of that, there's no need for any one to say it again," he returned. "Let us be practical, and talk about your friend."

"Yes—I want to!"

" Shall I try to find him ? "

" No ! I mean, not for a moment."

" But you think he may be in some danger—— ? "

" I think I'm part of the danger. I'm even wondering——"

She stopped abruptly. He noticed the increase in her colour.

" Yes ? " he murmured. " Shall I help you ? "

" Can you ? "

" You're wondering whether to remove yourself from him ? "

" Your mind works quickly ! "

" I have cultivated the habit. But your next wonder would be, perhaps, where to remove yourself to ? "

" Yes."

" There are not many alternatives ? "

" No."

" You have no friends here ? "

She shook her head.

" Then is one of the alternatives—Johannesburg ? "

" It's the only alternative," she answered.

" I see," said Brent, and paused. " Well, I do not go back on my offer. Which, you remember, was made without any terms."

" But—if I went—there would be terms."

" What terms ? "

" Yours."

It was a big moment for Hector Brent. He had never wanted any woman as he wanted Vera. He had discovered that during the journey. The discovery had driven him to follow her here to this unsavoury room. But he wanted her too much to play his usual game.

" You're saying things you don't fully under-

stand," he answered slowly. "Things you probably wouldn't say if you did understand—or if you were in a calmer mood. If you come to Johannesburg with me, my terms will be that you come perfectly free—"

"But I wouldn't be free!" she interrupted.
"Can one go through life taking, and taking, and taking—and giving nothing? Can one be free, if one lives under endless obligation?"

"You paid a compliment to my mind a minute ago," said Brent. "You, too, have a mind."

"I'm trying to use it."

"Does your heart approve of your mind?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. Would you be under an obligation to me for your happiness? For your perfect adventure? For your romance? If so—why wait for Johannesburg?"

He held out his arms. She stared at him, then suddenly flamed, and moved towards him. As she did so, he dropped his arms to his side.

"I am going to be perfectly frank with you, my dear young lady," said Brent. "I am going to tell you that I believe I could overcome your hesitation, and eventually satisfy one half of your nature. I am—as the saying goes—quite a good lover—and in spite of your reserve, *you* were never designed to die an old maid. But you hesitated, as you wouldn't have hesitated if I had been, say, your other friend. In other words, you would go to Johannesburg not for my sake, or your sake—but for his sake. You are having a very lucky escape!"

If Brent had been cheating—and he was not—he could not have played his cards more effectively. There was real affection in Vera's voice when she replied:

"I wish—really and truly—that you could satisfy both halves of my nature."

"So, frankly, do I," he replied. "But if you had not felt yourself a danger to your more fortunate friend, would you have suggested leaving him?"

"No."

"Then *I* suggest that he may consider the danger worth it." He walked to the window and gazed out into the darkening street. "Though it is your danger I am really concerned with, not his."

Suddenly he darted aside. Glass splintered, and a blade came hurtling through space. It missed him by two inches and embedded itself in the opposite wall.

"Not to mention my own danger," he murmured, as Vera stared at the quivering knife. "I think this is where we blow out the candle!"

CHAPTER XVI

VERA DECIDES

BRENT blew out the candle the instant after he had spoken. The room became an uncomfortable dark space. A restless movement developed swiftly in the black negative of the street outside the broken window, leapt across the negative like a flying shadow, and ceased. The black negative was still again.

Vera felt a hand on her arm. Brent's fingers gripped her and drew her to the corner of the wall in which the window was situated --the corner that was safest from a second knife. But no second knife came. They waited, motionless, their senses strained. Brent heard the beating of Vera's heart, and listened to it with queer emotion. A deadly weapon had brought them momentarily together. Perhaps, after all, he owed something to the would-be assassin!

"Don't move!" he ordered softly, as he felt a sudden flutter. "Not yet!"

"We must find out what's happening!" she whispered.

"In a moment," he whispered back. "You're in my charge till I hand you over!"

They waited another minute. It was a minute he often thought of. He recalled the tantalising closeness of her, the faint fragrance of her, and that beating of her heart so near to his. He recalled, also, an instant of temptation which surprised him because it was unlike himself. Though he lived by a

philosophy formed out of his impulses, the impulses had been schooled to obey the philosophy. He wondered in his retrospects what would have happened if he had yielded to the instant—whether some new reality would have been born, or whether his meiniories would have been less sweet. But he never regretted that he had not put the matter to the test. He still had his realities, human and imperfect. It was good to have one memory that imperfection could not touch. . . .

Now movement revived on the negative of the street. It came shadowing back. It solidified at the street door just below, and raced up the stair with swift, creaking tread. Brent did hold Vera a little closer then. As he did so he moved round till he was between her and the door, then turned his body to prepare for an attack. It was one of the rare occasions on which he felt helpless. Had he been alone, he would not have minded in the least.

"Vera! Where are you?"

The door of the room burst open as the words were uttered. With a gasp of relief that Brent also remembered, the girl slipped away from him and dashed towards the door.

"And this," thought Brent, "is where we re-light the candle?"

But he did not light it. He was not sure yet that illumination was required.

"Yes, yes, I'm quite safe, John!" he heard Vera's voice through the darkness. "What's happening?"

"Who's with you?" came the swift response.

"Mr. Brent," Brent answered for himself. "We had some illumination, but we put it out just after a nasty knife came through the window. The knife is still sticking in the wall."

"My God!" muttered John "It—didn't—" "It didn't," Brent assured him "It merely might have. Was it meant for us?"

"No—for me, I imagine," replied John "We must get out of this as quickly as we can. Yes, but how did you get here, Mr. Brent?"

"By poking my nose into other people's business," he said "And now, I suppose, I'm to poke my nose out of it?"

"He's been wonderful, John!" exclaimed Vera "He was anxious about us, and he followed. I believe I should have gone batty if he hadn't turned up when he did. He—he knows I'm grateful."

"And he also knows," added Brent, "that there is no time now to express gratitude, whether deserved or not. So what is the next step in this wholly inexplicable game?"

"The next step is that Miss Wray must leave here this moment."

"Not alone?"

"No. With me or with you."

"Ah!" murmured Brent, while Vera's lips tightened "I am quite ready to take her back to my hotel. I have even offered to take her as far as Johannesburg. If we all agree, it is in her interest, the offer still stands. What is your opinion?"

John did not answer for a moment.

"I'll go, John, if you want me to," said Vera.

"Want you to!" exclaimed John impulsively. Then his tone changed "Yes—I think—yes, I want you to."

"But I must know why, John," said Vera quietly "Isn't the—job open for me any longer?"

"No."

"That's not enough. I've got to have the reason."

"The reason is simple. The job's too damned dangerous."

"You mean, for me?"

"Of course."

"Well, we'll leave that for a moment. What about your danger? Will that go on?"

"Don't worry," replied John. "You needn't. I'll join you later—in Johannesburg." He made a sudden despairing movement, as though to end an intolerable situation. "You must believe me, it's best, Vera. I've no right. . . . Yes, Mr. Brent's our solution. And when I do meet you in Johannesburg," he went on to Brent, "I'll try to express some of the gratitude there's no time for here."

He turned abruptly, but Vera's fingers gripped his sleeve. Brent cleared his throat.

"I'm not sure that you have quite understood Miss Wray," he said. "When she asked about your own danger, I think she wanted to know whether she herself was adding to it?"

"Yes, that's it, John," added Vera. "Would I make things more difficult for you than they are if I stayed with you?"

He ought to have answered at once, and if he had done so Vera's next days would have been very different. But he hesitated, and when he exclaimed, "Yes, by Jove, you would!" she knew he was lying.

And that was why, when he removed her fingers gently from his sleeve and ran down the stairs into the street, she followed him.

"Go back!" he ordered, as she caught him up.

"You're rotten at fibs!" she retorted. "That job's still open, and I'm taking it."

Alone in the gloomy little room, Brent watched

the shadowy figures from the window till they disappeared.

"I never knew I was such a magnificent person!" he communed with himself. "One lives and learns!"

Then he lit the candle, and crossed with it to the wall in which the knife was embedded.

"I wonder," he thought, "whether I had better have this as a souvenir?"

CHAPTER XVII

JOHN'S STORY

They threaded their way through dark streets and alleys. They went across small bridges and under arches. In one street the buildings on either side were so close that Vera felt as though she were groping through a tunnel, the whole journey in fact, appeared to be through a spiritual underworld that was attempting to stifle them before they could reach the freedom of space.

They did not say a word. He concentrated on the direction, she on following his unspoken instructions. He often paused for an instant to glance round. Once he suddenly seized her arm and luggered her into some back passage where they waited a full minute while quarrelling voices pitched himself out of a window high above them and nobody passed along the road they had just left. Then they resumed their tortuous way twisting and turning, till at last, round the corner of a lonely street Vera sensed the open space she longed for, and felt she could breathe again.

A man slipped out of a shadow. John muttered a few words to him, and the man nodded. Then John turned to Vera.

"In here," he whispered.

They entered the shadow from which the man had slipped, went through a narrow doorway, and passed along a little passage to a back room. The room was illuminated by a lamp turned low. Bright lights did not appear to be the fashion in Khartoum.

The man did not accompany them in. He stayed outside, watching.

"Now we're going to talk," said John. "I've got a lot to tell you."

"Are you going to tell me why you're here—at last?" she asked.

"Yes. Pretty well everything. And, after that, we can decide."

Vera smiled as she sat down on a low stool.

"I've already decided," she replied. "But go on."

"You may have decided, but I haven't," he returned, shaking his head. "Well— we'll see. I was to have met a friend here this evening. The man I had to consult before—before I knew whether I could offer you that job. I had to get some information from him about the position, and ——" He broke off, and frowned at himself. "No, this is no good—I'm beginning at the wrong end of the story. The start of the story occurred, actually, some years ago . . . Wait a moment!"

He darted from the room. His attitude disturbed her. He seemed to have lost his usual calmness.

"If he's developing nerves," she thought, "I must see that mine stay steady!"

He was only away for a few seconds. When he returned he exclaimed,

"Sorry. I just wanted to make quite sure everything was serene. Now, then. This friend of mine—Bob, no need to trouble about the rest—"

"Is he the man who is watching outside?" she interrupted.

"Eh? Oh, no. That's a native. He's O.K., though—'one of us,' as the saying goes. Bob and I were officers together in the Air Force. We were pretty close friends—school together, and all that—

and for some while we were stationed out in the East here. We got to know all this district pretty thoroughly—Egypt, Sudan, Somaliland, Abyssinia, Arabia. . . . And then something happened that brought a change."

He paused, and suddenly raised his eyes from the floor at which he had been staring, and fixed them on her.

"I'm going to let you into a few secrets," he said, "and some of them may be rather of the sickly-heroic order—I mean, they may sound like that. But—well, friendship's a queer thing, and sometimes men develop friendships that are as fine and as firm as any friendship between a man and a woman. The friendship between Bob and myself was that kind. Please realise that I'm not trying to impress you. We were always ready to do anything for each other. Well, that's enough about that."

"I understand," said Vera.

"I believe you do." His eyes were still on hers, probing their depths. "Yes—I can see you do. You're the kind that would." Now he stared at the floor again. "We all have our weaknesses. Bob's was drink. That damns a man in some people's eyes, but life's taught me that a person can have plenty of sins and still go to heaven with a credit account. One night when he and I were out together there was a bit of a brawl. No, that's wrong. A damned ghastly brawl. Bob had had too much, and I'd lost sight of him. When I found him, some poor woman was trying to take advantage of his condition—or his condition was making him try to take advantage of her—God knows which!—and the woman's lover had just joined the party and was getting excited. I knew the signs, but I wasn't quite quick enough. It was all over in a flash. The lover

sprang upon Bob with a knife, Bob knocked the knife round, and the fellow was stuck by his own blade. . . . I'm sorry this is such a ghastly story."

"It's pretty grim," answered Vera, "but I can stand it."

"The next bit's grimmer. The woman pulled the knife out of her lover's chest and stuck it in her own. Things can happen like that out here. Emotion's fierce and sudden. Well—there was a situation, if you like!"

"Awful! Was your friend——?"

"Brought in guilty of murder or man-slaughter? Oh, no! When a British officer misbehaves himself it's a delicate matter, particularly when natives are involved. Prestige and so forth. You know. Or, if you don't, I knew! I knew that the affair would be hushed up as far as possible—as a matter of fact, I was the only witness of the tragedy, so it depended largely on me how it was going to be revealed—and that there was a bit of native trouble on that made the hushing-up all the more necessary. Court-martial, yes. Probable dismissal from the service, yes. But nothing more."

"That was quite enough," commented Vera.

"Yes. When a chap's court-martialled, it's the end of his career. Some people would be just as content to be hanged—and Bob was one of them. Don't forget, he *hadn't* committed murder. That would have been different. He'd just got drunk, and in the act of self-defence had turned a knife meant for himself on to the other fellow."

"I'm not forgetting that," said Vera. "That was why I said a court-martial seemed quite enough. I suppose he *was* court-martialled?"

"No—he wasn't," replied John slowly. "Now we're coming to the sickly-heroic bit. *I* was."

" You ? " she exclaimed. " But . . . you'd had nothing to do with it ! "

" No. But I wasn't engaged. Bob was. It would have ended everything."

" I—see. "

Through the silence that followed, a voice in the distance chanted thinly and vacuously. The song of the bottle went on.

" But—*would* it have ended everything ? " asked Vera.

" Oh—pretty big disgrace, you know," he answered. " Especially in families where Army's in the blood."

" It wouldn't have made any difference if she'd been the right sort of a girl ! "

" She was the right sort of a girl." The response came quickly and sensitively. " And Bob was the right sort of a man. She knew of his weakness—and how to deal with it. Bob never got drunk again."

" John—may we go on being ruthlessly frank ? " said Vera. " Or are we coming to things you can't quite talk about, after all ? "

" The wall's down, Vera," he replied. " And I know the question you want to ask. Yes, I was pretty fond of her. That was another reason why I did it."

" But what about Bob ! Was he willing to accept your sacrifice ? " she demanded.

He stirred uneasily.

" Bob made the devil of a fuss," he answered. " It was the last time he ever touched a drop. But he gave way at last—when I'd convinced him—that it was the only way to avert a tragedy for his fiancée as well as himself——"

" He shouldn't have given way even then ! " she interrupted.

"Don't you think so?"

"No! You didn't give the girl a chance of proving herself in a test!"

"Suppose—she hadn't proved herself?"

"Then would it have mattered?"

"Yes—to Bob. But I admit I thought of that afterwards. So did Bob himself. Don't picture him as a scatter-brained, worthless fellow, please. Just a chap with a weakness—which he got over. You may be right in thinking we acted foolishly. There wasn't much time to decide, and Bob was drunk, and my own head was in a whirl. But—well, that's what we did, and once we'd begun there was no turning back."

"And you were dismissed from the Service?"

He nodded.

"And—not being engaged—didn't care?" she pressed. "Continue the frankness, John!"

"I cared like hell," he replied. "More than I'd dreamt was possible. It knocked the bottom out of everything, and I found I had just one ambition in life."

"To get even with it again?"

"Correct guess. To wipe the slate clean. As a matter of fact, I swore I would to my C.O. Swore he'd hear from me again. And Bob, who knew all about it, and who was going through his own little hell, you may be sure, was just living to help me. Well, he's given me my chance."

"And wiped *his* slate clean."

"By God—he has!"

The words came with sudden, choking emotion. He jumped up and moved to the door, standing with his back to her and staring out into the night.

"He was to have met me here, as I've told you," said John, without turning. "This house belongs to

the fellow who is watching outside—and who also owns that other house you were in, by the way. We once did him a bit of a service he's not forgotten. That's why he's working for us now. . . . Well, Bob arrived here yesterday, to wait for me. Came along in his aeroplane, and intended to take me on the next stage of the journey himself. So Hussian tells me. That's the fellow outside. But Bob's disappeared. He evidently anticipated the possibility, because he left a note. I expect his disappearance was caused by the same hand that threw that knife. There's—there's devils' work going on here. . . ."

He swung round and returned to Vera.

"Listen," he said. "This is what Bob found out—and *this* is why I'm here. Abyssinia is the centre of inflammable country. War is pretty well bound to break out there one day. It's got Darkest Africa on the south and west. It's got conflicting European interests on the east. North-east is Arabia—sheik district—while Abyssinia itself is boiling up for a mess, through both external and internal pressure. Politics — geography — natural resources — racial instincts—that queer thing called Patriotism that is at the bottom of every conflagration—that justifies human agony and sheds glory on a heap of bones—they're all smouldering here, and a stray spark will start the fire. It's happened before. History's packed with it. We never learn. It'll happen again. But the fire *we're* concerned with is the one that may happen—at any moment—and that may not die down again."

"Don't they all die down again?" said Vera.

"Yes, of course. And so will this one. But it may last the hell of a time—it may be the biggest fire the world has ever known, and leave it in the

biggest mess afterwards—if we're right about a certain person whom I've got to find and interview." He paused, and his eyes stared into space as though trying to read the future. "Yes, it may come now, or wait to turn a local blaze into a world-wide conflagration."

"That sounds pretty awful," agreed Vera.

"And it'll be more awful than it sounds," he responded. "We talk of these things—we read of them—we see pictures of them. But nobody can understand the reality without actual experience—personal experience. When that comes wallop, like a sudden solidified nightmare, it's too late to do anything but howl and hit back!"

"Then we must certainly interview this Certain Person," remarked Vera. "Who is he?"

"We?" repeated John, abruptly pulled up, and looking at her oddly.

"Of course," she answered. "Who is he? A Sheik?"

"Yes."

"Have I seen his picture—on your mantelpiece in London?"

"By Jove—*have* you?" he exclaimed. "Bob made that sketch the one time he saw him. He thought I might find it useful."

"How did Bob get on to him?"

"I'm not sure. Heard rumours, I think, ignored official scepticism, and—attended to the rumours. His information was thoroughly vague, but he was convinced it rested on a solid foundation, and he wrote to me to come out and follow it up. And ever since I received his letter, I've been shadowed."

Now the pieces of the mysterious jigsaw began to formulate into a dark picture in Vera's mind. She

listened intently, while John developed the picture further.

"The first thing I did," he went on, "was to visit the Foreign Office. I soon found that was no good! In the first place, every Government Department—and particularly, I imagine, the Foreign Office—is a playground for cranks and lunatics, and the main work of the lesser officials is to get rid of the cranks and lunatics without at the same time getting rid of any votes. I did manage to see one really responsible person. He listened to all I had to say—and then we came to 'the second place.' He referred, with infinite tact, to my record. 'Exactly,' I said. 'And this is going to put that right.' He was quite decent. But he couldn't give me any official help, or even recognise me officially. He said at the end, however—let's try and recall the exact words, they were rather choice—" He closed his eyes for a moment. "Yes. Here they are. 'If you think you can perform a service to your country, I am the last person to deflect you from the attempt—' I loved that word deflect!—but if you engage in any incident or meet any episode in which the question of your authority arises, you have no official authority. You are just following your own individual whim. I do not even know anything about it—nothing whatever. I've never seen you.' His smile then was quite human. 'You're just telling me,' I answered, 'that I can't expect any official help if I get into a difficulty?' 'Not even if you are condemned to imprisonment or death as a spy,' he said. 'Well, that's all right,' I replied, 'but suppose I do something good for my country—for the whole world, in fact—how about that record of mine you've so kindly referred to?' 'That would be a question for the Air Ministry,' he said. 'Would the Air Ministry

reinstate me ? ' I asked. Now came perhaps the nicest bit of all ' Do you expect a person in my position to pronounce definite opinions ? ' he said

' My dear sir ! But if you are successful I dare say you would come and tell me, and I am on excellent terms with the Air Ministry ' Then, of course, he had to take the gilt off the gingerbread by assuring me that I was embarking on a wild goose chase, and that was that "

" And then you started on the wild goose chase," said Vera .

" I did And on the eve of departure I met a ridiculous girl who insisted on accompanying me to Khartoum "

" And farther "

" We'll decide that now. The Sheik's name is Am Rab He's evidently an extraordinary character. He only appears to have one weakness, and it is through that weakness, Bob told me, that we may be driven to seek his secrets All other means may fail. In Bob's last note — the one Hussin handed me when I first came here this evening—he says that Am Rab is meeting a Danakil chief at one of the secret wells in the foothills of Abyssinia It's pretty bad country You get definite forms of culture in Addis Ababa, but these Danakils are murderous nomads, wandering from one hidden spot to another, and rising in their social scale according to the number of people they have killed Charming idea, isn't it ? And what I've got to do is to find out exactly what passes at this meeting "

" Do you know when it's going to be held ? "

" Not the exact date Any time from now on. That's one reason why we can't delay The other reason is that I want to get to the spot before Am Rab can get information that we're on his heels."

She noticed that he had used the first person plural for the first time, and smiled to herself.

"But do you know the exact spot?"

"Bob's left me a chart of the district, and he's marked the secret well he banks on. But, of course, it's a toss up."

"And how do we reach the spot?"

"Bob's aeroplane. It's not a hundred yards from where we're sitting."

"Room for two?"

"Yes."

She reflected for a few seconds; not to make up her mind, but to present her reasons. Then she said:

"It seems to me, John, that three aeroplanes are competing for me, unless I decide to stay in Khartoum—which of course is impossible. One of the aeroplanes is going back to England. Well, the return trip would cost £70, and I've only between £40 and £50 left. And even if you lent me the balance, you would be sending me to a police station without coming back yourself to prove my alibi. No one else can do it. The second aeroplane is going to Johannesburg. Shall I take that—and find security with Mr. Brent, while you're finding the reverse with Am Rab? Should I be happy in Johannesburg? Honestly, John—what do you take me for?"

"For something not quite real," he answered, "or else for something so exceptionally real that it still remains unbelievable. But I haven't told you Am Rab's weakness yet."

"You've no need to. It's women. And I'm travelling with you in the third aeroplane." *

CHAPTER XVIII

OPEN SPACES

VERA was in the sky again, experiencing a new thrill.

In the air-liners, with their little luxuries and general atmosphere of security, it had almost seemed at times as though she were travelling in a train; but now she was in an aerial two-seater, built not for pleasure but for business, and the little luxuries were absent. She was speeding at a breathless pace through the night sky with the sense of a shooting-star. Immediately below her were two small lights—one red, one green. Below them was vast black space. She noted with relief that John was perfectly at home with the joy-stick, managing the controls as easily as though he were driving a car, but it took her some while to shed her first feeling of insecurity and relax into the mystic enthrallment of night flying.

Conversation was impossible. You had to shout to make yourself heard above the engine's voice. But there was no need of conversation. They had said all that required to be said before they had started, and nothing remained to be thrashed out until new events set up new problems.

Vera found herself trying to speculate on the new events while the aeroplane rushed her towards them. Although John had lifted the veil at last and had explained their mission—she no longer thought of the mission as his alone—she was still unable to read the future. All she knew was that the face of

the Sheik was growing closer and closer, obtruding more and more definitely between her and the stars.

Yet it seemed impossible even now that she was destined to meet him, still less to set her wits against his. If it ever came to that, what would happen? Would the quality within her that had stirred Mr Menzies, Hector Brent, her present companion, and many others, each in his separate way, have power to move a man whose mind dwelt, perhaps on world power? She recalled the strange, compelling, almost fanatical eyes of the picture. She tried to imagine her own eyes meeting the reality. Whose would drop first? The question gave her a thrill.

Then her mind moved from her personal issues to the greater issues involved. Watching the back of her companion she became suddenly enthralled by the immense possibilities to which he was leading her through his own idealism. He was performing a bigger service than merely providing her with an adventure, or a haven from her troubles. He was letting her share in his ambition and giving her a chance to develop from a vacillating nonentity into significance. She hoped that something inside her was driving her on, that she was not being shoved forward entirely by circumstances. She felt that her individuality was being born, or that it was growing into full consciousness. Perhaps the glamour of night flying contributed to her new sense of power. "Well, whether I've been guided by circumstances or not up to now," she thought, "I'm not going to obey them any more! Whatever happens, I'm going on with this—and I'm as determined as John is to see it through to the end!"

The black miles flowed away behind them.

"Jump on a bus and go to a cinema."

"Of course, our conversation's all wrong for the wide open spaces," he grinned. "We ought to be communing with Cosmos, or making passionate love, or hurling each other about. Forgive me for not being a pukka he-man. . . . I say, am I getting foolish? I think perhaps I'd better stretch out and sleep it off. But—"

"We mustn't *both* go to sleep."

"No—it wouldn't be wise."

"It would be idiotic. I've had mine, so I'll keep watch. Only you must tell me what I've got to watch for!"

"Anything that moves," he replied

"That sounds easy," she said.

"It may not be quite as easy as it sounds. Don't forget protective colouring. Some of the folk about here are as brown as the ground."

"But I suppose they wear *some* clothes?"

"True."

"What about animals? Do camels run about wild?"

"No—they're generally much tamer than the things that are on them! Ditto horses. Apart from these, we're not likely to be troubled till we get into the foothills. There we may come upon a zebra or a gazelle."

"Go on."

"What?"

"With the animals. I want to know all about my new friends!"

"Oh—water buck."

"You're only mentioning the gentle ones. Any lions and tigers?"

"Never heard of any. Buffaloes and elephants—but I don't suppose we'll come across them. After

all, we're not going to walk across the whole of Abyssinia."

"That brings me to another question, John," she said, "I'm sorry if I'm a nuisance, but I've got to know things. Why are we walking the next bit? Why did we come down just now? It wasn't engine trouble, was it?"

"No," he answered. "She's been going like a bird. Well, we came down for lots of reasons. Here's a handful. I can't count on finding any landing space once we enter the hills. It's semi-desert there, and soon becomes thick bush forest. Not that we're likely to go into the forest. And then, we don't want to run out of petrol. We must save a bit to get home with. And then, we don't want anybody to see our aeroplane. Before we leave this spot I'll have to try and stow it away somewhere. Perhaps behind those acacias. Marvellous trees, acacias—and popular despite their thorns. Gum-arabic, tannin, and so forth." He yawned. "Any more questions?"

"No. You're too tired to answer them."

"I believe I am. I'm talking through a sort of a mist. Idiotic. But—do you know—I haven't slept for forty-eight hours. Of course, I ought to have in Alexandria—that was two nights ago, wasn't it?—but the hotel bed was such a novelty it kept me awake. The night before that—yes, I slept in the train, but look at the unearthly hour they shoved us out at Brindisi! . . . And the night before that—what happened the night before that—oh, of course. Davis. Good old Davis . . . and his car. . . ."

He had closed his eyes more than once. Now he jerked them open again.

"I say—I *am* going dippy!" he blinked. "All of a sudden! Reaction, I expect, and the strain of

night-driving—and knowing I've got somebody to look after me."

He had been squatting at her feet. All at once the head that had been drooping forward became alert, and twisted round. "Yes, but this isn't right!" he exclaimed. "I'm looking after *you*!"

He was about to rise, but she shoved him down again.

"We're looking after each other," she retorted. "For heaven's sake, go to sleep!"

"All right," he murmured. His head grew heavy. "But don't forget—the moment anything moves—wake me. . . . Especially if they have combs or feathers in their hair."

She imagined, mistakenly, that his last remark was a further sign of his dippiness. He was fast asleep as she eased his head till it rested against her knees.

CHAPTER XIX

IN A SMALLER SPACE

"ANYTHING?" inquired the inspector.

"Not a darn," replied the detective. "I think I shall resign, and take up poultry-farming."

The inspector looked gloomy.

"It's certainly a mystery," he said. "I suppose there's no doubt about it being a different girl?"

"Look at her," retorted the detective, and tossed a photograph across the inspector's desk. On the back was written "Mlle Wray, Rue Bernard, Paris." The picture itself was of a chic blonde. "I tried it on Mrs Thurston. 'What, *that* her?' says she. 'No more like her than my dead aunt!' I tried it on our taximan. Blank again. 'The young leddy I drove to the Grosvenor 'ad dark 'air,' says he. 'It was a dark night,' I reminded him. 'Think I'd make a mistake about a young leddy like that!' he said. 'You don't meet 'er kind twice!'"

"You were wasting your time with the taximan," growled the inspector, hopelessly comparing the photograph of Mlle. Wray with one of another lady bearing the same name. "He took his fare from Mrs. Thurston's address to the Grosvenor, so of course if Mrs Thurston didn't identify——"

"Not so fast, not so fast!" interrupted the detective. "Do people always speak the truth? I grant you I wasted my time—I'm paid to waste a lot—but after Mrs. Thurston's first outpourings she's drawn in a bit. She's got a weak spot for her late lodger, that's clear, and a silly woman like that

might repent of her frankness and try to fool us."

"That's a point," admitted the inspector. "But the taximan has squashed it."

"He has."

"What about Mrs. Menzies?"

"She never saw the girl."

"True, but she had a description of the girl from her own private sleuth before her husband's death."

"Yes, I know. I'll see her, if you think it's any good. But we're obviously barking up the wrong tree."

The inspector's frown grew.

"And I thought we *were* getting somewhere that time," he exclaimed in exasperation. "We track our girl as far as Paris—"

"We think we track her as far as Paris," corrected the detective. "None of the people who think they saw her will swear to it on oath."

"All right. We think we have tracked her to Paris. And there we lose sight of her, until we discover that a lady with a passport in the name of Wray went over—"

"The day after we thought our own Miss Wray went over," interposed the detective. "So the two things wouldn't have fitted, anyway!"

"Then why did you go over yourself?" snapped the inspector.

"Because the second clue might have proved our first clues wrong," smiled the detective. "Also, in these days of too rapid transit, she *might* have made the journey twice. I wish we could get a line on that bloke who was with her at the Grosvenor. Damned fool the commissionnaire was, not to hear the address they gave to the taxi when they drove off after the row!"

"And damn fool the driver of the second taxi, not to come forward when he's wanted."

"Perhaps he's got measles."

"And damn fool everybody for there not being *one* who spotted the taxi's number. And damn fool you and me, for not being able to get beyond Paris——"

"If as far," sighed the detective. He took the two photographs, shoved the one Mlle Wray aside, and stared at the other. "What do *you* think?" he demanded suddenly.

"Obvious," replied the inspector.

"Well, if she did it," said the detective, "I'll bet she had a reason."

"That's an infantile remark, coming from a student of motives," answered the inspector. "Even a child knows that everything's done with a reason."

"You didn't let me finish," said the detective. "A reason I'd forgive her for."

"Ah! If a woman's pretty enough, a man will forgive her for anything."

"And another woman will forgive her for nothing." He stared harder at the photograph, then thrust it aside. "Shall I confide a secret to you, sir? I perfectly loathe and detest this case. Well, now I suppose I'd better go and see that motorist fellow. What's his blasted name? Davis."

CHAPTER XX

PLANS BEFORE BATTLE

WHEN John woke up the sun was high, and he was lying full length on the ground with a handkerchief over his face. He snatched the handkerchief away—it was his own, but he did not remember placing it there—and sat up.

Vera was a little way off. She was watching a small kettle that was boiling over an oil-stove. On a white cloth near the kettle were biscuits, butter, cheese and chocolate.

"Hallo—you've been busy!" he called.

He felt wonderfully refreshed.

"I hope not too busy," she answered, turning to him. "I've been foraging. Do all aeroplanes have larders?"

He rose and walked to her.

"We've even tea, and tea-cups, and sugar and tinned milk," she added. "Perhaps it isn't the thing to drink tea in a desert, but don't forget I'm a novice."

"Tea's the thing anywhere," he replied. "To English people, anyway. It's a splendid idea. We'll have to watch our water, though—in case we get lost between the wells." He stood and regarded her while she completed her preparations for the meal. He seemed to notice a difference in her, but whether that was merely the reflection of her new background or not he could not say. "I slept pretty soundly, didn't I?"

"Like a top," she nodded. "And you look all the better for it."

"Yes, all I need is a shave. Anything to report?"

"No. If there had been, I'd have woken you to report it."

"No zoological visitors?"

"None. Not even with combs or feathers in their heads. By the way, what did you mean by that idiotic remark?"

"That tea looks good! Hurry up!"

"I do hope you'll soon lose your shocking habit of ignoring my leading questions, John," she reproved.

"I asked you about the combs and feathers."

"So you did."

"Well—what about them?"

"Nothing. I expect I was just babbling."

"That's what I thought at the time, but now I know I was wrong. If you don't tell me why you warned me against combs and feathers, I won't put any sugar in your tea!"

"All right, Vera. It's just a little local custom. Some of the Danakil warriors stick combs or feathers in their hair for swank."

"What are they swanking about?"

"Their warlike deeds."

"Such as?"

"Aren't you a sticker? Well, after all, to be warned is to be armed. It means that the wearer has killed a man. Nobody who hasn't may have the adornment."

"Thank you. You won't help me, ever, by keeping things from me. How horrible, though. I never knew the Abyssinians were so bloodthirsty——"

"Whoa! Don't get mixed up!" he interrupted.

"These aren't Abyssinians. The real Abyssinians are quite separate from these wandering tribes.

I won't bore you stiff by giving you the local history, but there are loads of wild folk around here who are as big a nuisance to the Abyssinians as they are to other people. They wander about the desert and the lowlands. One doesn't know much about 'em. And, as you've gathered, they haven't polite ideas. But we'll see they don't play any tricks on us, so don't worry."

"I believe I'm worrying less than you are," she answered with a smile. "Tea's ready. Now for our Hampstead Heath picnic!"

They turned their attention for a few minutes to the business of eating and drinking. It was the queerest repast Vera had ever taken. She felt completely alone in the world with her companion, and nothing occurred to dispel the sensation. She did not see even a bird or an insect, and the tall acacias reared above them in motionless grace.

The heat was intense. The tea failed disappointingly to cool them. In fact, she felt hotter afterwards, and wondered whether John had applauded her idea out of mere politeness. She longed for an ice-cream soda. . . .

"It'll be cooler in the hills," said John, as she dabbed her face with her handkerchief.

"Thank God for that!" she replied. "When do we start?"

"As soon as we've finished and cleared up," he answered, "and I've shoved the bus into a less conspicuous position."

"And what exactly is our plan, John?" she asked. . . .

"Our plan is to get to the well Bob's marked on his map. Look!" He drew the map from his pocket and, moving beside her, opened it.

"This is where we are—I think," he said,

indicating the spot with his finger. "At that little blue cross. Now follow the blue dots into the hills. Unfortunately, we won't really find blue dots, or it would be easy. They end—here. Then there's a gap. But not far off—on the map—are three more crosses, marked 1, 2 and 3. Bob believes that the meeting is to be at one of these crosses—they're wells—and the numbers represent the order of his guesses."

"I see," murmured Vera, and stared at the three crosses, fascinated.

"So what we've got to do is to take them in his order," went on John, "and see if we're lucky."

"Will it be easy to know?" she inquired.

"I think so. We'll find activity of some kind, I expect. Probably before we get there. The other wells will most likely be deserted."

She studied the map, trying to impress its main features on her mind. Then she said:

"What happens when we meet anybody? How do we explain ourselves?"

"Yes, I was coming to that. We shan't be able to hide ourselves all the time, and listen behind screens! My plan—unless you've got a better—is that we're just a couple of mad adventurers——"

"That won't be far from the truth!" she commented.

"I dare say not," he laughed, "so we won't have any difficulty in acting our parts. We've got lost. And we're interested in everything—and we're thoroughly unpolitical."

"How have we got lost? I mean—are we on a walking tour?"

"A forced one."

"Our aeroplane has crashed?"

"I think so? Don't you?"

" But it hasn't."

" You mean, they might offer to come along and look at the damage ? "

" Natural curiosity."

" Yes, if they only had to go a mile or two. But the nearest of these wells is considerably farther off than a mile or two. Still, of course, it's a thought," he admitted. " Yes, and we might meet somebody before we've travelled the distance. This is splendid, Vera—two minds to work out our plan instead of only one ! Well, you've raised the difficulty. Have you a solution ? "

" I've an idea for one," she replied, " but you will know whether it's practicable or not."

" We can't really smash the machine, you know."

" No, but isn't there something you can do to it that will make it seem as though we had to come down—and that you can put right again afterwards when we want to use it again ? "

" Vera, you're a genius !" he cried. " You get better and better—only I've a notion I've said that before ! Yes, I dare say I could do a bit of subtle tinkering with the thing. . . . How about clearing out the petrol and hiding it ? No, I've nothing to clear it out into. Never mind, I'll manage. Leave that to me. Plan arranged and agreed—or is there anything more ? "

" Well, I had just one other thought," said Vera, with a rather odd expression. " Do people who wear feathers in their heads after a murder worry about personal relationships ? "

" You'll have to enlarge on that," he answered.

" Am I being dense ? "

" Very dense ! Or perhaps you're just pretending to be ? Will they be curious to know whether we

are brother and sister, or husband and wife, or what?"

"I see," he murmured. "No—I don't think they'll worry."

"How about Am Rab?"

"Oh, yes! *He* might!"

"Well, then? What are we? We'd better decide beforehand, or we may get caught. It would be a bit awkward if I told one person I was your aunt, and you told another you were my uncle!"

"*You* won't be telling anybody anything," he pointed out, "because *you* won't understand the lingo. Still, we'll decide. Do I look like your brother?"

"Not a bit."

"But I might to them. All Japs seem to belong to the same family to us! I think brother and sister's the best ticket—if you don't mind?"

"No, I agree. So that's fixed. When I meet Am Rab, I am your sister—and he needn't be jealous!"

John stared at his empty cup. He now seemed a little less keen upon the idea.

"Damn Am Rab!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I beg your pardon. First things first. Brother and sister it shall be—and now, let's get busy!"

He leapt to his feet and walked to the aeroplane, while she watched him with an amused and happy little smile.

CHAPTER XXI

THE POOL

THE second day of walking was drawing to a close. The sun burned pitilessly upon their bodies ; and Vera, who prided herself on her smooth skin, had long ceased to care what she looked like. At first she had utilised her small flap-jack freely to repair the damage of perspiration. "There is no reason why one should not remain civilised, even in the wide open spaces," she had thought. But the wide open spaces had become undulating, often tortuously so ; sometimes thick with tall trees or flat-topped bushes, sometimes antagonistic with bristling, thorny undergrowth ; so now she had given up, and had permitted the miles of weary walking to write their story upon her, for any one to read.

So far, there was only John to do the reading. He, of course, would read kindly, if he read at all. But he had his own story to contend against and, being the pack-horse—he refused doggedly to yield his rucksack to her—his plight was even worse than hers. His hair was almost humorous in its untidiness. Vera's curl, on the other hand, was the one item that had kept its flag flying. It still remained plastered against her forehead a little way above her left eyebrow.

Once he commented on it.

"That curl of yours *won't* give up, will it ?" he smiled.

"Do you want it to ?" she asked.

" I should hate it to," he answered.

" So should I," she said. " It reminds me of home." Then she added, " Not that I want to be home. I much prefer this, even though it's killing me. What is an Abyssinian well like? Can one bathe in it ? "

" If no one's looking," he laughed.

In spite of their condition, they maintained their spirits. For their own sakes, and each other's.

The greatest anxiety they had endured had been a miniature plague of locusts. A tiny black cloud had appeared on the horizon towards the end of the first evening, and as it had increased in size John had suddenly seized Vera's hand and dragged her towards cover. But the cloud had merely crossed a corner of the sky, and had then vanished.

" What was it ? " she had gasped.

" Locusts," he had told her. " If they had come our way they might have been unpleasant."

But he did not tell her how unpleasant—that they could blot out the sun, turn day into night as they filled the air with the roar of their countless wings, and devour all they settled on.

The first night was spent in a little arena of bushes. They had partaken of a frugal repast—the water was strictly rationed—and had then lain down fully clothed, saving for their shoes. The spot had been, as far as they could determine, at the end of the blue-dotted track on Bob's map. Next morning they had " guessed " their course towards Well No. 1, penetrating mountain country, but skirting the most forbidding heights. On one ridge, when they reached it, Vera had stood in awed wonder. Once, on Chanctonbury Ring in Sussex, she had looked towards London over a distance that had seemed unbelievable. That distance was a mere little jump

compared with : distance that stretched into the torn heart of Abyssinia. Ridge beyond ridge, peak beyond peak, each ridge and peak scarred and divided by terrifying gorges and ravines—the scene looked as though some impossible giant of prehistoric days had stretched earthwards from the skies, seized a vast handful of Africa, thrown it up, and then let it come down again and smash itself. . . .

"Cheer up—we're not going there," John had reassured her.

She had turned away with relief, and they had descended into lower land. And now they were nearing the first well, and were wondering whether they would reach it before sunset.

"Let's stop a minute," said John suddenly.

"Make it two minutes," suggested Vera.

He slipped the rucksack from his shoulders and consulted the map. She came to his side and peered at it with him.

"Think we're getting there?" she asked.

"I think we're there," he answered. "Or as near as dammit! But—if so—I imagine Bob's guessed wrong."

He raised his eyes from the map and stared round. His eyes roamed across the sandy ground and prickly undergrowth, and came to rest at a great wall of tumbled rocks.

"Wait here," he said.

He began walking cautiously towards the rocks. Vera watched him for a few seconds, then disobeyed and followed him.

He reached the rocks and disappeared through a narrow defile. When she reached the rocks, he was just returning, and he frowned at her disapprovingly.

"I'm not apologising," she observed.

" You want putting across my knee and spanking ! " he retorted.

" If you try it," she answered, " I'll tell Am Rab. Is he there ? "

He shook his head.

" No one," he replied. " We've got the water all to ourselves."

He led her through the defile. They emerged from darkness into soft light. She stared in rapture at the large, rock-bottomed pool.

" Oh, my God ! " she murmured, almost deliriously. " Where's some soap ? My kingdom for Vinolia ! "

" This is certainly a wonderful spot," he agreed.

But his voice had a note of disappointment in it.

" Do let's be happy ! " she begged.

" I'm not complaining," he answered.

" Your voice is ! "

" Is it ? Sorry ! Well—I was just wishing that Bob's guess had been right. You know what this means, of course. We'll have to push on again."

" Yes—but not to-night ! "

" I wonder whether we oughtn't to ? " She stared at him. " We might cover another mile or two before dark."

" John ! " she exclaimed. " How many miles do you suppose we have walked to-day ? "

" Quite a number," he admitted.

" Quite a number ! I should say so ! Can we walk any more ? Perhaps you can, but I don't believe I could walk another mile if the fate of the world depended on it ! "

She sat down on a flat rock at the edge of the pool. He roused himself.

" And you won't have to," he said. " Of course

not. I'm woolly! We've done our bit for the day, and now for fun, eh? I'm ready to stop!"

He sat down on the rocky ledge beside her, leaned over, and studied their reflections.

"Not so good!" she commented, peering down with him.

"You're all right," he replied. "I'm the sketch."

She lowered her fingers to the surface and made ripples. The water was cool, and caused her to forget all but the moment. John, beside her, sat very still.

"Do you know—I can't help it—I'm glad Bob's guess was wrong," she said, playing her fingers through the water. "This spot is absolutely perfect. It wouldn't be if swarms of sheiks were about, and—what did you call them?—those people with feathers in their hair—"

"Danakils," he said.

"Imagine them!" She raised her head, and gazed round. "Imagine them standing about—full of all their hateful ideas—staring at us—spoiling the peace of it all!"

"It's—nicer this way."

"Yes. And—because we're tired and can't go on—we've got a whole night of it this way! Whatever happens to-morrow, and whatever happened yesterday, here we are, *now*! It's a queer thing, John—especially after the fatigue of the last few hours—but I don't think I ever felt so alive as I do at this moment!"

She lifted her arms, then dropped them to her side. John remained very still, caught between heaven and hell. He longed to take her into his arms, and to make this spot for ever hallowed in his memory. He knew that, if he did so, she would not resist him. He knew that she needed him as he needed her. But

he could not forget to-morrow, or his responsibility in leading her towards it. The picture of sheiks and Danakils grew painfully vivid in his mind, and he felt he had no right to the things he craved until he had led her safely through their danger.

Perhaps, too, he feared the weakness of yielding to personal happiness, and of diverting his thoughts from his original purpose. If he failed in his mission through any fault of his own, he knew there would be torture afterwards.

So, instead of responding to her happy, impulsive spirit, he rose suddenly from the rock and began to move away.

"Where are you going?" she called.

"To have a look around," he answered. "As we are going to spend the night here, we must be quite sure everything's O.K. Stay by this pool till I come back, and shout bluè hell if you see anybody."

"Can you be away for fifteen minutes," she asked, "without going far?"

"If you like. Why?"

"So I can bathe."

"Right. And I'll have my dip afterwards. But we've no towels, you know," he added the warning.

"Then we'll have to shake ourselves like dogs!"

There were two exits from the rocky arena that encircled the pool and hid it from the world outside. One was the narrow defile by which they had entered, the other was a wider passage that led from the opposite side to a farther region of rocks, and to vegetation. The tops of tall trees reared their heads above some of the promontories. John walked round the pool to the wider passage, and vanished from sight.

She looked after him for a few moments, then gave a little gurgle of delight. Slipping out of her sticky

clothes, she sat on the edge of the water, dangling her feet in its pleasant coolness. The sun, casting long shadows, was no longer a scorching curse. It burned pleasantly on her skin, with a warmth that could be dispelled the instant she chose . . . She dispelled it suddenly, and slipped into the pool.

As she did so, a man who was not John appeared in the passage by which he had left, and watched her.

CHAPTER XXII

VOICES IN THE SILENCE

THE man who had watched Vera enter the pool was not visible when, after five minutes of sheer cool glory, she came out. Looking around to make certain there were no intruding eyes, she adopted the dog's principle of shaking itself dry, and then stood in a patch of sunlight, by a wall of baking rock, to complete the drying operation. When John returned—he gave her twenty minutes, not fifteen—he found her dressed again, and sitting very contentedly in a shadow.

"Enjoy it?" he asked.

"Heavenly," she replied. "Now it's your turn—and mine for a walk."

"I thought you couldn't walk another step," he reminded her.

"That was before the pool's magic," she smiled. "Now I believe I could walk another dozen miles—only I'm not going to! Did you find all clear outside?"

"Yes—as clear as that water. Not a soul to pollute it."

"Then you needn't worry while I wander."

"I'll worry if you wander far," he answered, as she rose. "Keep close, won't you?" She nodded. "I say, Vera—how do you women do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get back to civilisation. You look as though you'd just stepped out of a band-box."

"Half of our job is to cover up the blemishes.

Perhaps because we've so many. You'll look the same after you've had your dip. But I warn you, it's cold."

"It can't be too cold for me."

"And I believe, while I was swimming, I hit a fish."

"I don't think that's likely, but if you did we'll catch him afterwards for supper." He took off his coat. "Well, scoot, or there'll be a scandal!"

She laughed and ran towards the gap.

"Stop when you're round the bend," he called after her, "and you'll hear a splash."

She obeyed, and a minute later was laughing again.

"That wasn't a splash, that was a smack!" she shouted. "Rotten!"

She wandered among the rocks and reached the trees beyond. She was invaded by a sense of unreality. The most unreal thing was her own mood. Why wasn't she anxious? No, terrified? The situation was enough to agitate even a hardened adventurer, and Vera was a novice. Perhaps that was the reason? She had not yet developed the power to visualise, and the dull well-ordered life to which she had forced herself against her inner instincts had given her no colourful experiences on which to form vivid mental pictures. All her experiences hitherto had been small and rather sordid. Half-baked. When adventure beckoned, she had slammed the gate. "Once I have really met a blood-thirsty Danakil with feathers in his hair, it'll be different," she thought. "Then I'll know!"

Yet, after all, she was under-rating the immediate past. She had been shadowed by spics, she had been drugged in a train, and she had seen a knife flash through a window and embed itself in a wall.

These incidents should have given her imagination sufficient edge to sharpen her perception of terror.

She sought other reasons for her illogical composure. "Am I a fatalist?" she wondered. "What will happen, *will* happen! Is that it?"

The theory did not satisfy her. She tried again. John? Hector Brent had designated him as the kind of man who succeeded in whatever he set out to do. That was her own idea about him. Perhaps she was trusting him so completely that, even in the middle of uncertainty and danger, her faith went on, and she accepted his impregnability. . . .

"*Do I accept his impregnability?*" she suddenly asked herself.

She recalled recent moments of vague doubt; moments when he had seemed more wavering than he had been in London or during the earlier stages of their journey. At times she had almost felt as though she were the stronger of the two. John was undoubtedly strong, but was he invulnerable? She tried to trace the beginning of her subconscious doubts. Perhaps it was in Khartoum, where he had been badly shaken by his friend's note, and where he had made his last effort to turn her back.

"And I didn't go back," she pondered, "because he needed me—I knew he needed me——"

And then the more probable reason for her mood came to her in a flash of self-knowledge. It lay within herself. The spirit of self-confidence that had grown in her during the past few days had woven itself around her protectively. She had already proved that she was more than just a typist. She had had breathless experiences and had passed through a gamut of emotions, but they had not downed her as they must have done had she been weaker. On the contrary, they had strengthened her, and given

her a belief in her power. They had destroyed much of her fear.

"I'm not even afraid of Am Rab!" she announced to a clump of acacias. "Yes, and if I meet him—I'll beat him!"

When she returned to the pool she found John preparing their simple evening meal. She laughed at his relieved expression.

"Did you think I wasn't coming back?" she asked.

"I wouldn't have been very pleased if you hadn't," he replied. "I don't suppose you saw anything or heard anything?"

"I heard something."

"What?"

"I heard you hit the water with your stomach. Shocking, John! One day, when we can find a shop and buy bathing dresses, I'll teach you how to dive."

"That wasn't my usual style," he retorted, with a grin. "I slipped."

"Bad divers blame their rocks," she answered. "How did you enjoy it, after you'd got rid of your pain?"

"Fine. The only trouble is, it gives one too big an appetite when food has to be rationed. This wouldn't be a bad spot to live for ever in, would it?"

"I'd love it if one could vary the diet. Same old biscuits," she added, regarding the fare. "Same old cheese. Cheese was never my pet passion—when I get back I'll never be able to look it in the face again!"

"Pretend it's the last we've got," he suggested, with grim humour, "and you'll hoard every chew!"

"But it isn't the last we've got, is it?" she inquired, rather anxiously.

"No. It may save us a bit of food trouble, though, if we meet Am Rab at the second well."

"You mean we may not last out till the third?"

"We'll last out till the thirtieth, only by that time you'll be even less keen on the diet!"

"Shall I like Am Rab's diet?" she inquired, with a grimace. They were squatting now by the slab of rock on which their meal was laid. "Tell me something about sheiks. What do they eat? I'm horribly ignorant."

"Meat—like you and me."

"I hope you meant like you and I!"

"Touché," he smiled. "That was a mistake in grammar, not a symbol of Bedouin cannibalism! You know, you keep up your spirits wonderfully. I'll tell you what I think of you when we get back to London."

"Wait by all means," she replied. "It would be a pity to turn my head. Are the Bedouins the same as sheiks?"

"Bedouins are wandering Arabs, and sheiks are the aristocracy."

"I see. And where do they get their meat from? Do the shops wander with them?"

"Yes. They have their own herds. You might regard some of the tribes almost as moving cities."

"How confused the little Bedouin babies must be when they learn geography. Imagine if our own cities didn't stay put! If Norwich were in Norfolk one week, and Devon the next! Isn't it fun talking nonsense? Well, meat'll be something. What else? Oh, do they use knives and forks?"

"They prefer their fingers. Same as Richard the First did, according to the films."

"We'll have to teach Am Rab manners. Go on. Do we get pudding?"

" We may get honey and rice."

" Good ! "

" Or locusts and lizards. Not so good ! "

" You don't really mean that ? " she exclaimed.

" Please be truthful, if light-hearted ! I'm learning a new subject, and don't want to be misled ! "

" I'm being quite truthful," he assured her, " and after all, the French eat frogs' legs. Still, even Bedouins don't order locusts and lizards unless there's a scarcity, so I don't expect you'll be put to the test. Let's substitute dates and bananas."

" Oh, much better ! " she exclaimed. " As soon as I meet Am Rab I'll make a date with him to have a banana. Oh, dear, I'm getting worse ! Do you know, John, I hardly recognise myself out here. Even my conversation's changing. As a rule it's terribly careful. Don't you remember how careful it was at our first meeting ? Now the lid's come off. But don't worry—it'll sober down presently. I think, in a desert, one gets waves of conversational delirium."

" I'm not worrying, Vera," he answered. " At least—not at this moment."

As they finished their meal the low sunlight climbed the wall of rock to the east and slanted upwards off the rim into the sky. Outlines that had been distinct grew dim. The pool became an oval of shadowy velvet. The stillness around them seemed to increase, even though, while they chatted, they had heard nothing but their own voices ; and in the coming of night, with its swift transformation from light to darkness, they lowered their voices till conversation ceased altogether and they participated in the silence.

They sat silent for a long while, watching the darkness grow deeper and deeper. It wiped out

their forms. "Are you there?" she whispered once. "Feel the evidence," he whispered back. She touched his extended hand for an instant. Then he withdrew it. She wondered how many other men would have withdrawn their hands after that momentary contact.

"Yes, he's strong," she thought. "Quite ridiculously."

Presently she heard him moving.

"Going to bed?" she inquired.

"Unless you'd like a game of cards," he answered.

"Bit late," she replied. "It must be quite nine!"

They laughed. Then she moved also, groping her way to a sandy niche she had marked before the light went. Lying on her back, she discovered that the darkness was merely local. Above her were countless stars, shining with a brilliance she had never seen before. She seemed to be lying under a high ceiling of massed jewels.

"And where, to-morrow night?" she wondered.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE NIGHT VISITOR

VERA woke suddenly from a nightmare.

It was one of the most unpleasant nightmares she had ever endured; and its atmosphere still impregnated the darkness to which she opened her eyes. She had dreamt that the rocky enclosure in which they lay was filled with people. Invisible people, as black as the night, and shutting out the stars with their bodies. They moved swiftly and silently about. Though she had neither seen nor heard them, she had been acutely conscious of them, and of their sinister, suffocating influence. She wanted to dive into the pool to escape from them, but when she had tried to do so her feet had been held. Then she had attempted to scream, but dark hands covered her mouth. . . . Ugh! Horrible!

Opening her eyes now, and hugging reality lest it should slip from her again, she had a queer sensation that the nightmare was hurrying away with pattering feet. She kept very still, fearing that a movement might bring the feet patterning back. Then she became angry with herself for these juvenile mental gymnastics, and sat up. The way to send nightmares about their business is not to hold one's breath and quake, but to laugh. She gave a little laugh, to prove her sanity.

She hoped John would hear the laugh. She would like him to ask what she was laughing at, so that she could tell him. The sound of their voices would

complete the nightmare's defeat, and she could settle to sleep again afterwards with the knowledge that the pattering feet would not return.

But John was disappointing. He did not hear her laugh. Or, if he did, he was too sleepy himself to feel any curiosity about it.

She lay down again. She felt a little annoyed with John. He *might* have been awake ! Or, failing that, he might have placed himself closer to her, so that she could at least see him if she wanted to. He was as bashful as a schoolboy ! Though she supposed *he* would call it being the perfect gentleman. Well, he was a very illogical gentleman. He had begun their acquaintance by staring at her very rudely, and she had called him down for his rudeness. Now that their acquaintance had ripened into friendship, he had become meticulously polite and adhered to all the conventions. She, on the other hand, had shed her original protective frigidity, and found herself less interested in the conventions. It was difficult to visualise Mrs. Grundy in a desert, and to be worried by her frown.

"John !" she called softly.

The idiot ! Why didn't he reply ?

"John ! "

She remembered the time when she had called to him in their sleeping compartment, and when he had not been there. The memory did not soothe her. She peered harder towards the rock near which he was lying, trying to penetrate the blackness and make out his form. Surely she ought to be able to make out his form ?

"John !" she cried sharply.

That should have woken him. It did not. Springing to her feet, she ran to the rock. His shape did not materialise while she was running, or when

she reached the spot. She groped down with her hand, and found empty space.

"I am *not* going to be silly," she told herself. "He can't have been spirited away. He's mousing around somewhere, and will be back in a few moments."

She waited, while the theory became less and less watertight. Even if he had been roaming about he must have heard her call through this stillness. Unless he had roamed a long way off? Well, perhaps he had roamed a long way off! Again comfort failed to respond to her theorising. If he had gone a long way off, what had he gone for?

With danger lurking everywhere around, that was the last thing he would have done—to have left her alone—unless . . .

She suddenly felt sick. But, unlike on that former occasion in the sleeping compartment, she did not go to pieces. She drew resolutely and deliberately on her new strength, determined that it should stand this severe test.

Groping her way round the pool, and calling John's name softly, she reached at last the narrow defile through which they had originally entered their sanctuary. A figure blocked the passage. Although it wore white she did not see it until she was within a few feet of it. It looked like a pale ghost that had slipped out of a black crack. She pulled herself up sharply, her main impulse being not to make any outward display of the fear that was throbbing inside her.

"You do well, white lady," said the figure.

The strangeness of the accent was offset by the richness of the voice. Instinct told her what logic could not explain. This was Am Rab. The man who had drawn them so compellingly across Europe into

Africa, and in whose hands were far more lives than theirs. On the point of challenging him by name, Vera suddenly desisted. Those would be ruinous tactics. "I have never heard of Am Rab," raced instruction through her mind. "I do not know anything. We are just English travellers, and we have had an aeroplane accident." Aloud she asked:

"Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" replied the ghost.

"That doesn't matter! Where's my—brother? He should be here! Do you know?"

"Your brother," repeated the ghost.

"Yes."

"And he should be here, so say you?"

"You heard me."

"I heard you, white lady. But I would hear more. How are you here, you and your brother, and—"

"I'll tell you nothing until you tell me where my brother is," interupted Vera, "and—and if you've done anything to him—"

"Yes?"

"—there will be a war!"

The ghost seemed faintly amused. She could not see his features clearly but, as she found out later, he had a rather disturbing habit of impressing his mood on another person without revealing it in any outward form. She felt, rather than saw, his amusement, and was chilled by it. There was little humour, as she understood humour, in his composition.

"War," he said. "That is a big thing to come out of a small thing."

"I don't regard my brother's life as a small thing!"

"All life is a small thing. All life, I would say, that is separate. Look!" He raised his arm, and, angry at her obedience, she followed his gaze up to

the stars. "Now will you tell me that your brother's life is not a small thing. Even yours? Even mine? Yet this, down here, is all we know, so we try to arrange, do we not? You will arrange a war for your brother. Many stars will go out, that one may continue to shine. It would not be the first time. But it is a pity to kill—"

"You think that?" she interrupted, shaking herself out of the momentary spell. His rich voice contained hypnotic music, and even his words made a melody. Yes, without any doubt, this was Am Rab! But her job was not to be overpowered by him—not to have her senses dulled to the mysterious sinister truth that composed the music!

"It is a pity to kill the many for the few," he answered, nodding slowly. "The many should only be killed for the more."

"No one should be killed at all," she retorted.

"That was not the philosophy of Mohammed," the ghost returned, "who came to Abyssinia from my own country thirteen hundred years ago, and who strove by war to exalt Allah. A time may come when there shall be no killing. When the day shall be safe for the king and the flea, and all that are between. And when the night shall be safe for a brother and a sister to lie unprotected by the side of cool waters in a land they know not, and among people they know not. Perhaps we may talk more of these things." He paused, and again she was conscious of a new mood before his next words indicated it. "And perhaps, if your religion is not as mine, I may pretend to accept it for the pleasure of your gratitude." The mood passed. "But the truth that is learned by those who do not keep their eyes closed in pleasure is the truth of mathematics. Three are more than two. The large swallows the

small. And till the large mouth learns that Allah has two faces, one being held away like the other side of the moon, to be reached only by those who have the faith to walk on space—even Mohammed, you will remember, had not the power to bring the mountain to him—the small food will rebel, and, if it is not killed in the cooking, will go down struggling—and sometimes choke . . . But perhaps, white lady, you have not studied mathematics at an English college, as I have ? ”

“ Is that why you speak English so well ? ” she asked.

“ The compliment is treasured.”

The very absurdity of the conversation at such a moment marked the spell of the man. He dominated situations as well as people, rising above them by his uncanny spiritual quality. It was easy to understand how a man of this type could gather adherents and become a significant influence for better or worse.

“ It wasn’t intended as a compliment,” she retorted.

“ That is a thousand pities. I must impress you in some other way. Your brother is safe.”

She felt him watching her keenly as he suddenly shot this statement at her. Had the casual abruptness of the information been deliberate ? While almost suffocating with relief, she answered coolly.

“ That’s a good thing for you.”

“ Yes, I am spared your war.”

“ Where is he ? ”

“ You ask as one who rules. Are you a queen in your country ? ”

“ Never mind who I am ! ”

“ But I must know. We will make our first bargain. I will tell you what you wish to know

when you have told me what I wish to know. Who are you, and who is your brother ? ”

“ Didn’t *he* tell you ? ”

“ Would I ask, if he had ? Your questions come as thickly as flies. Who are you ? You keep yourself waiting.”

“ Just an English traveller.”

“ It is true, the English take strange journeys. And did you walk from London ? There is a new expression, but I do not recall it.”

“ If you mean hiking, we haven’t hiked ! We’re aviators.”

“ Where is your aeroplane ? ”

“ Something went wrong with it. We had a forced landing.”

She prayed he would not ask her what had gone wrong with it.

“ How far from here ? ”

“ A long distance.”

“ Two miles ? Or ten ? Or twenty ? ”

“ No, a thousand.”

“ So many ? ”

“ Do you ever laugh ? ” she exclaimed.

He considered the question soberly.

“ It is a dangerous custom,” he said, “ if one has not first decided that one needs to laugh. To laugh at a thing blinds one to what is behind it. Often, that is the purpose of laughter. What was wrong with your aeroplane ? ”

Her prayer had not been answered. Again he reverted to their subject with disconcerting abruptness, and again he watched closely for the reaction.

“ Engine trouble,” she responded vaguely.

“ What portion of the engine ? ” he pressed.

“ The portion that does the work ! ” she cried.

“ How much longer are we going on like this ? ”

" You are a remarkable white woman," he said, unperturbed. " You can answer questions as well as ask them, and you have the quality that many women lack saving in childbirth—courage. I have met many of your country, but not one like you, I think. Your aeroplane came down a thousand miles away because you had trouble with the portion of the engine that does the work. That, it is true, would bring any aeroplane down, and you have strength as well as courage to walk a thousand miles. I am sorry to interfere with your sleep after a journey of such length. Well, there was one thing I learned as well as mathematics in England. It was that the English have, very often, a strange way of saying things. So I will agree that you have now kept your side of the bargain, and will keep mine. Your brother is being taken to the place where I am going, and where, if you are ready, I will also take you."

" How do I know you are speaking the truth ? " she demanded.

" How do I know *you* have spoken the truth ? " he replied. " Can we do more than trust each other ? If one of us has not spoken the truth, the other will presently find out. Is not that so ? "

" Well, tell me one more thing. Is my brother hurt ? "

" He is dead," he answered. He put out his hand and caught her. " He is alive. He is not hurt. You are very fond of your brother ? "

" I'll pay you out for that ! " she choked, every limb trembling.

He lifted her up, and carried her through the defile to his waiting camel.

CHAPTER XXIV

AM RAB

Of all the new forms of locomotion recently added to Vera's experience, the second seat on a camel's back proved to be least comfortable. The long slow strides could be reckoned by their jerks, and at each jerk she felt as if she were slipping off the insecure space she occupied.

For nearly an hour they travelled through the darkness. She wondered what instinct directed the way. But she did not ask any more questions, although there were some that needed to be asked, for she doubted whether she would receive satisfactory answers. The cruel lie with which her companion had at first answered her final question before leaving the well had taken away her appetite for conversation.

Just before light came, they stopped. She became conscious that they were no longer alone. Her companion bent forward and spoke in a strange tongue. A voice replied to him in the same tongue. Then followed low murmurs, and the sounds of men rustling. After that, the journey was resumed, and they became the centre of a line.

She watched the line develop from shadows into substance while the blackness of night melted into the grey of dawn. A faint blotch ahead of her became another camel, with a brown rider. Farther ahead were ponies, on which were riders of darker hue, and she suddenly noticed that most of them had feathers in their hair.

But there was no sign of John.

At last she broke the long silence, and asked another question.

"I do not see my brother," she said. "Have I your word of honour that he is safe, and that you are taking me to him? I suppose you know what a word of honour is?"

"You have my word of honour that he is safe," answered the Sheik. "You will be with him in a short while."

Satisfied, she relapsed into silence again.

The promise was fulfilled in a little over an hour. The small procession descended a sudden steep dip, curved round into a valley, and entered a region of thick vegetation. Somewhere through the trees gleamed a spot of dazzling brightness. It was the mounting sunlight playing on water.

Now the company was greatly increased. They went by little groups of dusky men with knives at their waists. Again she noted the ominous feathers. One large warrior, who stared at her with horrible grinning eyes as she passed him, appeared to have grown feathers in his head instead of hair. If each feather meant a head, he must have had a collection. Beyond, round another curve that led to a second valley, were tents. They wound through the tents, and did not stop till they reached the one that was most remote. John was standing outside, watched by a small group of Arabs.

He sprang forward eagerly as the obedient camel knelt, and helped Vera to the ground. The Sheik slipped down after her, and motioned them both into the tent. The floor inside the tent was richly carpeted. At one end was a low divan that appeared to be built entirely of variegated rugs.

The Sheik entered behind them, and closed the flap.

"Be seated," he said, "and we will talk."

He squatted on the ground as he spoke. His visitors or captives—Vera was not sure which—followed his example.

"Yes, and we've got a bit to talk about," remarked John, "so it's a lucky thing you can speak our lingo. We're not out for a fuss, but I suppose you know we could make some damn trouble over this?"

"So your sister has already informed me," answered the Sheik. "You have but to call on your Mr. MacDonald or Mr. Baldwin, and there will be a war."

"Hallo, you know something about politics, eh?" exclaimed John. "Good! So much the better. Personally I loathe and detest the very sound of the word, but it may come in useful this time! We're not standing for any nonsense from anybody!"

His mood was bellicose, and for moment it puzzled Vera. Then she realised that he was playing a game by representing himself as the type of adventurer least likely to possess the subtle soul of a spy.

"I myself do not appreciate nonsense," nodded the Sheik. "It wastes so much time, and time is valuable. Your time, perhaps? Mine, undoubtedly."

"We've wasted so much time since our accident that a little more or less doesn't seem to matter," grunted John. "Eh, Vera? But—"

"Vera," said the Sheik. "Yes, let us be introduced. And *your* name?"

"John Jones," lied John. "Sorry I can't give you a better one. What's yours?"

"I am Am Rab."

"Well, Mr. Rab," replied John, without a flicker,

" now that's over, will you tell me—and forgive my plain speaking—what the hell's the idea? Is it the usual habit of your tribe to pounce upon strangers in their sleep, and cart them off as prisoners one by one? " He turned to Vera. " I don't know what happened to you, Vera, it was all too quick, but I *was* pounced upon, and before I knew it a lot of these blighters had dragged me off God knows where! "

" Yes, you'd gone when I woke up," answered Vera. " But Mr. Rab seems to have stayed behind especially to look after me."

" You choose your phrases better than your brother," commented Am Rab to Vera. " If—to use his term—the blighters indeed belonged to my tribe, my patience might exhaust itself. But perhaps we may forgive him for his excitement."

" I don't want your forgiveness for anything," snapped John, " and what the deuce are you talking about? "

" Your courage exceeds your intelligence," replied Am Rab. " The people who seized you were not of my tribe. They were the people of these parts, whom I am visiting. But for my interference, you would most likely be making your complaints not in this world, but the next."

" I say—is that true? " exclaimed John.

" I sent some of my own friends ahead with you to ensure your safety, and remained behind myself to allow your sister a little more time to sleep, and to be her personal escort. Is that a reason for a war? " he inquired, turning again to Vera.

Their eyes met. She felt that hers were being bored, but she kept them steady.

" Thank you," she said. " But we couldn't guess that, could we? "

"No, by Jove, we couldn't!" cried John. "Of course, that puts a very different complexion on the case."

"It is good that you think so, Mr. Jones."

"Not a bit! Of course it does! So it was those confounded Danakils, was it?"

"Travellers usually study in advance the habits of the countries they pass through."

"That's correct, but we didn't intend to pass through this country. We meant to pass over it! Look here Mr. Nab——"

"Rab," corrected Vera.

"Oh, my mistake. Sorry. Look here, Mr Rab—are we safe now? I mean, could we go, if we wanted to?"

"Where would you go, Mr. Jones?" inquired Am Rab.

"That beats me," admitted John. "But I merely want to know whether we're still prisoners or not?"

Am Rab considered.

"Regard yourselves, perhaps, as my guests," he suggested. "Under my protection. You can go, of course, if you wish, but I would not advise it."

"Why not?"

"There are two reasons, one of which should be clear. You have said yourself you do not know where you would go. Here, as my guests, you and your sister can rest for some days—if you so wish—and make your plans. I will do my best to entertain you both."

His eyes again sought Vera's, and rested on her while John responded.

"Terribly decent of you! But what's the other reason?"

"The other reason is even more important,"

answered Am Rab. "Until I have made my influence felt a little more here, my protection will be useless when you are out of my sight. When I am assured it will be safe for you to go, I will inform you. I myself will be leaving in a few days' time, and it may that it will be wise for you to wait till then."

He spoke courteously, but Vera sensed the underlying order.

"And now," continued the Sheik, in a friendly voice which Vera did not trust, "is it permitted to ask you for the full story of your difficulties and your accident? I hope I may do that without intrusion?"

Then, for a quarter of an hour, John earned Vera's admiration. He told more lies than she had ever before heard in her life, and he told them so convincingly that at moments she almost believed them herself. This was their first long flight. They were not out for records, but for adventure, and, by Jove, they were getting it! They'd nearly crashed over Dijon. They had nearly descended into the Mediterranean. They'd struck storms in Greece, and been nearly murdered by an inn-keeper in Alexandria. And now they had developed engine-trouble in Abyssinia, and but for the intervention of a dear old Sheik, they would have ended their adventure here in the form of two more feathers in the Danakil coiffeurs. As he told his story he frequently referred to Vera for the name of a place, or confirmation of a point; and towards the conclusion she dropped into the tale herself and added lies almost as effective as his.

"So there you are," he ended up, "and here we are. And apparently here we'll be for some days to come! Well, personally—now we know you're not

after our blood—I'm very ready to accept your invitation and rest up here for a bit. Aren't you, Vera?"

"I think we are very lucky to have met Am Rab," she answered, "and I hope we'll be able to repay him."

She tried hard not to feel ashamed of her hypocrisy, and to remember that it was in a vital cause.

Am Rab smiled. He had listened intently, and had followed every point. He appeared to be as contented as they.

"I am here, in Abyssinia, in the cause of friendship," he said. "To offer advice, and to exchange views. But even people who are close neighbours do not always possess the same temperament—the same ideas of life—the same recreations. I have been anxious about my entertainment here. I have brought few of my own people with me. Just enough for what you, in Europe, call the Balance of Power. There is, in this spot, no—beauty."

John's eyes narrowed for an instant, but only for an instant. The next moment they were smiling, and he was exclaiming fatuously.

"Here's your chance, Vera! A flirtation with a Sheik! What a score!"

Vera glanced at him anxiously. In his effort to maintain the rôle of a hare-brained adventurer and to set aside his personal distaste for the job, was he not rather overdoing it? Am Rab regarded him gravely, and Vera would have given much to have known exactly what the Sheik was thinking.

"In that exploit," inquired Am Rab, "she would have her brother's approval?"

"Eh? Why not?" answered John. "Now that we know, of course, you are a gentleman!"

"What about my own approval?" asked Vera,

wondering whether her cheeks were as red as they felt. " Doesn't that have to be gained, too ? "

" That is even more necessary than your brother's," nodded Am Rab. " I will not seek it—yet. But perhaps, before long. In return for my service."

He rose abruptly.

" But that is for the future," he said. " Now let me conduct my guests to their tents."

CHAPTER XXV

CANVAS WALLS

LYING on a bed of many blankets that seemed strangely out of place in these primitive surroundings and staring up at the canvas roof of her tent, Vera reviewed her new position.

It was several hours since the interview in the Sheik's tent. She had been conducted to her present quarters, and had seen neither the Sheik nor John since. She knew that John's tent was not far off, but—possibly by design—it had not been pointed out to her, and she felt rather disturbingly cut off from him. She wanted to talk, and to discuss plans, but an Arab squatted outside—she could just catch a glimpse of his white costume through the tent opening—and although she believed he was friendly she also believed that he had had his orders, and would not let her wander if she attempted to do so.

Silence was not new to her. She had met it in many forms lately, but the silence around her now had a special quality of its own. All about her was teeming life, flowing secretly and darkly like a subterranean current. She felt it, although there was no oral or—apart from that glimpsed white figure—visible evidence of it. Her tent was in a little cove of trees, backed by a curve of rock. An edge of the pool that watered the district and explained its luxuriance was within a few feet of her "front door." If her host had wished to isolate her, he could not have selected a better spot.

The heat of the sun burning through the canvas,

and the drowsiness from which she was now freeing herself, made her long for the pool. After her meal, which had not been forbidding and which she had eaten ravenously, she had dozed, and made up for her lost sleep. There had been nothing else to do. The hours could not be allowed to slip by, however, with continued inactivity, and her one desire now was to bathe in the pool, get her blood moving again, and resume her activity.

"I wonder if that Arab would be a perfect gentleman if I asked him to remove himself for ten minutes?" she thought. Then came another reflection. "I wonder whether he would understand me if I asked him?"

Probably not. Still, it was worth the trying.

She rose from her blanket couch, performed the instinctive feminine operation of smoothing her hair, and walked to the tent opening. The squatting Arab turned his head, then jumped to his feet.

"Can you speak English?" she asked.

The Arab smiled charmingly in reply.

"If that means you can, would you mind going away while I bathe? And seeing that nobody else comes along? And may I use a blanket for a towel?"

The Arab continued to smile. The smile meant that he could not speak English, but that this did not prevent his pleasure in the sound of her exquisite and incomprehensible voice.

"So that's that," said Vera. "It's no good talking to you! And it's no good asking you where John is."

Words having failed, she tested action. She left the tent, and began to walk past him. But action proved equally disappointing. The Arab moved into her path, and very politely barred the way. Clearly she was not to be permitted to roam.

"What is the idea?" she asked.

She pointed in the direction she wanted to go, and raised her eyebrows. The Arab remained in her path, and shook his head. Still smiling, he said a few words in his own tongue, then made an eloquent gesture of regret. "It is a pity I cannot make you understand why you are to stay where you are," the gesture implied, "but you must assuredly stay where you are. Oh, yes, very charming white woman. Most assuredly!"

With a sigh, Vera returned into the tent. Another half-hour went by. She was beginning to speculate on the fruitfulness or otherwise of definite rebellion—and, after all, was it not reasonable that she should want to see her companion, and would not the Sheik himself agree to this if she were taken to him?—when a sound outside the tent made her spring to her feet.

A new voice broke the silence. It was less smooth than the Arab's, and there was a different quality in the phonetics. Peeping through the opening, she saw the Arab standing before a darker man. The darker man was obviously a Danakil warrior, and he wore the unpleasant symbols of triumph in his hair. He was in a mood that suggested he was ready to add to them, but the Arab smiled and stood in his path as he had stood in Vera's.

"That's a faithful servant," thought Vera. "But I wish he were a bit bigger!"

The Arab was actually a little above average height, but the giant he was interviewing dwarfed him. *

The argument proceeded, while Vera listened anxiously. Then a third figure joined them. To Vera's relief, it was another Arab.

The Danakil, outnumbered, scowled and went

away. The two Arabs conversed together. The second Arab vanished and returned a few minutes later. With him, now, was John.

"Thank God!" murmured Vera.

In a few seconds John stood at the tent opening and peered in.

"Anybody at home?" he asked.

"Come in, you idiot!" she replied.

"That's right, keep it light," he answered as he entered. "These chaps can't understand our words, but they may our manner, and we don't want them to think we're worried."

"Who's worried?" inquired Vera.

"True, sister," nodded John. "By the way, I hope you are forgiving me for the priceless fool I am making myself out to be?"

"It takes a clever man to be a fool when he wants to," she responded. "You're not losing any ground with me, John."

He threw her a grateful look, then glanced round.

"Pretty good. You're better off than I am," he commented, with his eyes on the pile of coloured blankets.

"Of course I am," she smiled. "I'm the favoured one."

"Yes—I think I want to talk to you about that."

"Perhaps it isn't necessary. I hope your quarters aren't too bad."

"They're not like this. But I've only two real complaints. The first is that I've a beastly sentinel outside all the while—"

"We're quits there!"

"Yes. So I see. The second is that my quarters are too far from yours. I'd feel happier to know I could hear you if you shouted."

" You'll hear me ! " she promised. " If my shout comes, they'll hear it all over Africa ! What's happening ? Anything ? Or nothing ? And, if nothing, how long is it going on ? "

" Oh—something's happened," he said.

She looked at him quickly. He replied with a warning glance, then walked casually back to the tent opening and suddenly poked his head out.

" Now, then, rubber-necks ! " he shouted. " What the hell do you think you're doing ? "

A moment later he withdrew his head and turned.

" They can't understand," said Vera.

" Of course not," he answered, " but it wasn't those two blighters I was really troubling about. I wanted to see if anybody else was around."

" Was there ? " He shook his head. " And what about the two blighters ? "

" Bit too close. But their curiosity is natural, and not necessarily sinister. We're just a couple of interesting monkeys to them, and they like to hear our jabber. They've moved off a bit now. Still, we'll keep our jabber low. We can't be too careful—and there's one person here who *can* understand our lingo."

" Do you think he's the only one ? "

" Pretty sure of it. That fellow's a genius, in his way. Well, after all, he'd have to be—he wouldn't be where he is if he weren't. Damn him. Sorry. Now, then, let's get to it. May I sit down ? "

He sat on the blanket pile, and she sat beside him. While they talked, they kept their eyes on the opening.

" I've had another interview with Am Rab," he said. " As a matter of fact, I had to, to get this interview with you. I don't think it was quite as good as the first—though, I'm not really sure.

You see, I know I'm trying to fool him, but I don't know whether he's trying to fool me—or if so, how far."

"Why should he try to fool you?" asked Vera.
"Unless he's suspicious of us?"

"Well, that's the point. And if he is suspicious, he won't show his hand openly until he's found out what he wants to about us. Just as we won't till we've found out what *we* want to about him. One thing we do know, though—he's watching us pretty closely. Keeping us well guarded, I mean."

"Yes, but that may just be for our own protection, John."

"I know. That's his obvious story. And the strength of his position is that it *is* so obvious! These Danakils—no good mincing matters, Vera—are pretty tough customers. We do need his protection. That's the devil of it. . . . By the way, I haven't told you yet what happened at the first well, have I? When I was carted off before you were."

"Wasn't Am Rab's story true, then?"

"Substantially, yes. But I can't help thinking it was mighty queer that he happened to be on the spot when the Danakils turned up."

"Yes. I've thought of that, too."

"Of course, it might have been a coincidence. Coincidences do happen. Or it might have happened without being such a coincidence, after all. Let's work it out. He is coming to meet the Danakils. Meeting place arranged. Here, at this well. The Danakils are camping here, but they go along—some of 'em—to welcome him on the road. Well No. 1 is more or less in the route. The Danakils find us, and he turns up just in time to stop their ferocity. All quite possible—eh?"

" Seems so," she agreed. " But some of the Arabs were already here when we arrived. Doesn't that suggest that Am Rab had already been here himself ? "

" You mean, their tents were pitched, and so forth ? Well, that might have been the work of Am Rab's advance guard. He might have been following with a few old faithfuls. Or the tents could have been pitched by his folk who went on ahead while he stayed to look after you. Anyhow, those details don't really matter. What matters is whether Am Rab really came to the first well by accident or design. If the former, good. If the latter, not so good ! It would mean that news reached him—from Khartoum ?—that we were on the way."

" You mean—the man who threw the knife ? "

" Yes. If he's here, or if he's got a message through——"

" Then you'll have to rely on *me*."

" What do you mean ? " But he knew, and he frowned heavily. " No, there's to be no vamp stuff ! That's what I want to speak to you about, Vera."

" I haven't mentioned vamp stuff ! " she retorted. " I've been studying Am Rab, and—well, never mind, we'll talk about that presently. I'm still waiting to know what happened at your second interview with him, and how you managed it."

" I managed it by a simple trick. I snored. Most of the time with my eyes open, à la Scarlet Pimpernel. I even imitated the Scarlet Pimpernel by snoring while I got up and peeped at my guard, and when he was almost snoring himself, I slipped out and did a bunk. They didn't find me for over an hour. In that hour I did more eavesdropping than

I'd done before in the whole of my life. I know enough of the local lingoës to be useful. That's another thing I hope they won't get on to! But though I heard a lot I didn't get a hint of what's in the wind, and of course I *would* be caught just when I'd got to the tent of the Danakil chief himself. His name's Burawa, and he's an ugly brute. I size him up as cruel and sly, and that's a bad combination. I told 'em I was looking for Am Rab——"

"Then you also told them you could speak their language!" exclaimed Vera.

He smiled.

"Jove, you're quick! And thank God for it—we both need to be here! But I'm not quite the oaf you've just taken me for. I merely shouted, 'Am Rab, Am Rab!' and made violent signs."

"Sorry."

"Not a bit. O.K. As a matter of fact, it was just the kind of position in which even the best people make slips. Only, this time, I didn't happen to. I acted the indignant, ignorant Englishman, and didn't turn a hair even when I heard them discussing whether they should take me to Am Rab or—well, never mind. They decided that discretion was the better part of valour—the decision may have been helped by the arrival of some Arabs—including my old guard—and I was carted off to Am Rab's tent. You ought to have seen me, Vera! I was the angry Englishman even to his stutter. I swore that there'd be a war if I was kept permanently apart from my sister, and asked why we'd been separated like this. Am Rab told me he had his reasons, and I must trust him, but he kindly said we could have half an hour together. Half an hour, Vera! How's that for rations? Well, here we are—and time's going—and we've got to decide quick what we're

going to do ! Yes, but one thing's decided already," he added. " You're having no *tête-a-têtes* with our amorous Sheik ! "

" If I do," she answered, " it won't be for the fun of them."

" I've just said you're not going to ! "

" Then what am I here for ? Be sensible, John. I am here as your last card—to be played if necessary."

" Yes, yes, I know all about that, but——"

He stopped abruptly. A shadow appeared on the side of the tent, and a moment later Am Rab entered.

He stood for a few seconds, regarding Vera with sombre intentness. Then he turned to John, and his expression changed.

" Your time is finished," he said. " You will now be conducted back to your tent."

John swore, with an emotion that fitted either of his characters—the real or the assumed.

" Look here ! " he cried angrily. " What *is* the meaning of all this ? "

" The meaning is that you cannot talk any more to your sister," answered Am Rab.

" That may be the meaning, but what's the reason ? "

" That, also, is easy to tell you. The reason is that I now desire to talk to her."

" All right. Go ahead. I don't suppose it matters if I stop and listen ? "

" You suppose wrongly, Mr. Jones. It will matter very much if you stop and listen. What I have to say to your sister is for her ears only, and shall be said to her alone."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SHEIK'S INVITATION

JOHN stood, hesitating. It was a heavy, uneasy moment, yet something deep inside Vera almost laughed. John had come to this spot to fulfil a burning ambition ; Am Rab, to complete some vital military or political design ; but during this moment all these things were swept aside, and nothing counted but a beautiful woman with a provocative curl ! "How ridiculous !" thought Vera. "It's what we want, though ! In a despicable way I'm enjoying it ! "

She hated herself for her enjoyment, and felt cheapened by it. "Well, that's *my* weakness !" she tried to defend herself. "If they have one, mayn't I ? "

The defence broke down immediately in a more constructive reflection. Was it not her job to prove stronger than either ?

"For a brother you are betraying unusual solicitude," observed Am Rab. There was a quiet sneer in his tone. "If you are afraid of—a flirtation, I think it was you who introduced the word. Even with some approval."

"Can't you take a joke ?" growled John.

"I can smile at a good one, yes," answered Am Rab. "Perhaps I consider this is a good one."

"And perhaps I don't !" retorted John. "Any-way, I don't consider it a joke to be treated as a prisoner ! Oh, yes, I know you're doing it for our good, but I don't agree with the method. English

people aren't used to being shut up in prisons, and being thrust into funk-holes! They rebel against it when they are!"

"You rebel, then?" inquired Am Rab. "Is this an ultimatum?"

"You'd better go, John," interposed Vera quickly. "I'll be all right. Don't worry!"

"Sure, Sis?"

"Quite sure!"

He gave way suddenly.

"Very well. I'll shoot!" As the Sheik's eyebrows went up, he explained, "A modern expression meaning to depart, vanish, buzz off. Nothing more dangerous. Though, if my sister isn't all right, I'll shoot in the other sense. Cheerio, Vera. And when I next see you—I expect we'll be allowed to meet again at Christmas—you can tell me I'm an idiot, and I'll apologise to Al Rab—sorry, Am—and we'll drink healths all round."

He turned abruptly and left the tent. His Arab guard outside rose to his feet as he did so.

"I hope you'll forgive my brother," said Vera when she and her host were alone. "He's all on edge."

"And you are not?" inquired Am Rab.

"Oh, a bit inside, I expect."

"But you show more control."

"It's necessary, isn't it? You yourself have plenty of control."

"You perceive that?"

"Well, naturally. I know something about men—though, I admit, I've never met anybody like you."

"Is that a compliment?"

"It may be. But you'd better not take it as one. We haven't really any time for flirtations. What did you want to see me about?"

He regarded her thoughtfully. For the first time she realised, in personal terms, his magnificence. She understood how women of a certain type must inevitably fall for him. "Of a certain type," she repeated in her thoughts.

"And I have never met a woman like you," said the Sheik. "If you wish, you can take that as a compliment."

"Well, I'm willing, provided there's no danger in it," she replied.

"There is danger in everything," he returned. "Even in cowardice. Unless you are a block of wood."

"Then perhaps I'd better be the block of wood!" "That is an impossibility. For me, as well as for you. If, as you say, you know something about men—and a beautiful woman can hardly escape such knowledge—I have no need to instruct you on that point. A block of wood stays where it is. When it is kicked, it stays where it falls. It has no power of movement. No desires. The latter to direct the former. You cannot stay where you are. Even when there is danger, you must experience."

"Thanks for the information."

"I am giving you no information. Beauty, and the desire for it, move you."

"Am Rab," said Vera, watching him frowningly, "is this the beginning of the flirtation?"

"The beginning, to those who refuse to be the slaves of time, may be a long way from the end."

"I'm relieved. I had an idea that sheiks suddenly seized you and hurled you about! But you're not the usual sort of sheik, are you? I expect that's why I'm not afraid of you."

He smiled.

"Many people are."

" I dare say. People who don't trouble."

" That is a thought half expressed. Please complete it."

" What I meant was that, when we take the trouble to know each other, there's nothing to fear."

" You will stand before a lion, then, and knowing that it hungers for you, advance and pat it ? "

" A lion's an animal. I'm talking of human beings."

" We are all animals."

" If you like. But has the lion control ? A human being is an animal that has learned control."

" Where did you learn your knowledge ? "

" I haven't any idea. I think I'm learning as I go along—and perhaps you're helping me to express what I'm learning. I'm not usually quite as clever as this."

" That is a relief."

Oh ! Am I boring you ? "

" On the contrary, I have never spoken to any woman more interesting. But a woman who is clever as well as beautiful—yes, she is one to make one very careful. One must not be content. One must match her. Even challenge her. What gives the human being the control that the lion lacks ? '

" I can't answer that. . . . Yes, I believe I can," she corrected herself. She thought for a moment. She visualised the Sheik as a lion, to help her thought. " Of course ! But haven't I said it ? Our power to understand each other. To understand each other's needs—and to find out—if we trouble, as I said—that most of our needs are pretty much the same, and we're not really the strangers we seem to be. You and I seem to be strangers, but aren't we talking together quite naturally ? "

Am Rab nodded.

"Well, that's because we're troubling," she concluded her argument. "But no matter how much trouble I took with your hungry lion, I couldn't make him understand, and so he'd swallow me up!"

After a short pause, Am Rab said :

"There is a man here who is not an animal. He is the chief of the tribe I am visiting. His name is Burawa. He kills for the pleasure of it. For the glory of it. He has killed twenty-three people. I am wrong. It is now twenty-four. Could you make him understand ?"

"I dare say I couldn't," she answered.

"How do you explain that?"

"Well—even assuming he knew my language, or I knew his, he probably wouldn't listen patiently to me, as you are doing. He wouldn't try."

"But he is a human being."

"But one who would need some one cleverer or stronger than I am to learn from. If he couldn't learn from anybody, then he *isn't* a human being, he's as low as the lion." Suddenly she added, "Yes, Am Rab, and if he's just an animal, *you* shouldn't have anything to do with him! Unless——"

"Yes?"

"Unless you are trying to teach him what I never could!"

The Sheik had been standing quietly all this while. Now he turned away and walked to the tent flap. He stood there for over a minute, staring out across the pool. Then he turned again and walked right up to Vera.

"It is true, you are a remarkable woman," he said. "I divined this the first time I saw you. That is why I have listened to you so patiently, to use your phrase, and why you have had an opportunity to show me your Western thought. But if I trouble

to understand you, will you trouble to understand me?"

"You can't really doubt it, Am Rab," she answered, struggling not to be overpowered by his eyes, which were close to hers and which now contained a new fire.

"I do not doubt it," he replied. "But to understand me—to understand my Eastern thought—yes, and *my* needs—"

He stopped abruptly. The fire had spurted into a flame. It died down.

"Well, that will take a little time," he said, calm again. "And so we complete the circle—the circle round which we revolve, and from which even words cannot free us—and I return to the object of this visit. You will eat with me to-night, in my tent?"

"I'd—love to," she answered. "Is my brother included in the invitation?"

"It is not necessary to reply to that question," he responded, "yet I will reply to it. Bring your brother, most assuredly—if you have one."

"You know I have one!" she exclaimed, while her heart missed a beat.

"Of course I know you have one," he returned, "as I know that your aeroplane was forced down near here by chance, and that we are meeting by chance. But I also know that you possess a strange power to vision chance events before they occur—if not, perhaps, to interpret the outcome of those events. 'I am not even afraid of Am Rab. Yes, and if I meet him, I will beat him.' It is a mistake to utter one's private thoughts aloud." He smiled. "Well, you have shown you are not afraid of him. But you have not yet beaten him. To-night, we shall resume the battle."

CHAPTER XXVII

BURAWA EXPLODES

WHEN Am Rab returned to his tent he found Burawa waiting for him. The Danakil chief was in a very black temper.

"All is not well!" he exclaimed fiercely. "How long do we wait?"

"Impatience serves no one," answered Am Rab. "What is troubling you?"

"You know, as I do, what is troubling me!" replied Burawa. "White carrion! They bring evil! They make delays! We were to speak to-day, and now it is to be to-night——"

"And now it is not to be to-night, but to-morrow," interposed the Sheik.

Burawa rolled his eyes and shook his fist.

"Not to-night?" he cried. "To-morrow? Why to-morrow?"

"I will not be free to talk with you to-night, Burawa," said Am Rab coolly.

"Is it that woman?"

Am Rab shrugged his shoulders.

"What if I kill the woman?"

"Then we shall never talk," answered the Sheik. "It will be the end of Burawa. But life is a small thing," he added, "so if her small life goes, it will not matter if yours goes, also."

"And yours?"

"Oh, yes. But later."

Burawa stamped round the tent. He stopped suddenly and stared at the Sheik intently.

"Why have you come here, Am Rab?" he demanded. "To trick us?"

"You waste time," answered Am Rab.

"It is you who waste time," retorted the Danakil chief. "We act more quickly!"

"And less wisely. One day you will do something very foolish, and the white people will close round you. Already you are surrounded--as you yourself surround Abyssinia. They wait to pounce. They watch your movements, mark your mistakes, make public your crimes in their market-places. The white circle grows smaller and smaller. The black centre is squeezed. You will end yet with a ring through your nose."

"It will not be fixed there by a woman!" glared Burawa.

Am Rab frowned. Within him burned fires as hot as those within his fierce host, but he controlled them. At this moment the memory of his recent conversation with Vera assisted him.

"We are not like you," Burawa went on, after a sultry pause. "To us, women are dung!"

"They help you to increase."

"And then we throw them away, or they will weaken us. As they weaken you! You are women yourselves!"

Am Rab walked up to Burawa.

"Shall I show you we are not?"

His voice was like cold steel. Burawa was not cowed by it, but his hand hesitated on the handle of his knife.

"No, we are not like you, Burawa," said Am Rab. "We have cool heads and just laws. If our traditions are not invaded, we live in peace with our neighbours. We do not slaughter for the sensation of it. We even travel, and explore the ways of others, that

we may the better study our own. You speak of the woman. What do you know of her? You have not the brain even to talk to her. You cannot talk to me in my language—I talk to you in yours. You care for nothing but your vanity and your stomach. But in two things we are the same, Burawa. We wander, and meet rules and boundaries when we wander. We are tethered like goats. We are, to many, no more than goats. Interesting. Picturesque. A good sight for tourists, a good picture for their cameras. But—goats." His eyes had narrowed ; and Burawa had watched them, despite himself, fascinated. Now they widened again, and Am Rab smiled. "But we will speak of these things to-morrow, my blood-thirsty friend. And you will be glad you waited, and did not commit the folly of ruining all the days ahead of you for the sake of killing one woman. But now you will go."

"Not yet," answered Burawa sullenly. "I have something else to speak of."

"Will not that wait, too, till to-morrow ? "

"No ! It is not of the woman this time, it is of the man. Do you know he has been here ? "

Am Rab's eyes narrowed again.

"To my tent ? " he demanded.

"Ah ! " cried the Danakil chief triumphantly. "Now whose is the folly ? Yes, to your tent. He escaped again. What story has he tricked you with ? It is not the true story, and you would not have been tricked if you had been wisely ignorant of his tongue, and had judged him—and the woman, too—by the thing inside you that *knows* ! Must you talk to a crow to know that it will pick your eyes out when you are lying dead ? And must you talk to white folk to know that they are liars and spies ? While the woman kept you, the man escaped and

came in here. He was caught, but you only can say if his eyes have seen anything they should not have seen, or if his prying ears have heard anything they should not have heard! You will not kill the woman till you have done with her. Well, that shall be your affair—till to-morrow. But can the man wait till to-morrow? A man who has the courage of a fool!"

"His courage matches yours," answered Am Rab. "Where is he now?"

"Your people have him."

"Has he been hurt?"

"He would have been, if I had had my will!"

"My people interfered with your will?"

"There is not much love at this moment, Am Rab, between your people and mine."

"Then the folly of your people even exceeds their courage. Why was I not told of this at once?"

"Because I chose to tell you myself——"

"And gave it second place! A woman was more important. I will see him."

He clapped his hands. Two Arabs entered the tent. He gave them a swift order, and they departed. He turned to Burawa again.

"I will see him alone," he said.

"And feel a knife in your throat?" sneered Burawa.

"If he is the spy you think he is," answered the Sheik scornfully, "how will it help him to put a knife in my throat—even if I commit the folly of providing him with the chance? He, like you, will be eager to hear what I have to say. Now, go, Burawa, or, as Allah is above us, you shall hear as little as he!"

The Danakil chief rolled his eyes angrily, but accepted the situation. He left the tent abruptly, and an aura of evil left with him.

A minute later the troublesome Englishman, closely guarded, was brought into Am Rab's presence.

For a little while the two men regarded each other without speaking. Each tried to read the mind of the other, and only succeeded in reading one part. It was the part dominated by a woman who threatened to confuse all the rest.

"Well, Mr. John Jones," said the Sheik, reverting without effort into the English tongue, "I await your explanation."

"You don't need it," retorted John. "It's obvious."

"The obvious sometimes needs explaining," observed Am Rab dryly.

"All right, I'll explain it," answered John, "though you've had it explained before. I object to imprisonment."

"You insist on that word."

"You insist on the fact!"

"And yet I still prefer my word protection. I have just talked with Burawa, and I understand that, but for my people, you would not be alive at this moment. Burawa desires me to kill you."

"Terribly sweet of him! What are your views on the subject?"

Am Rab reflected for a moment, then replied:

"To be honest with you, Mr. Jones, I am not sure."

"Really? And when do you propose to make up your mind?"

"You can assist me. Why were you here in my tent when they found you, and when I was concluding my conversation with your—sister?"

"I say, are you as dense as you seem. I was here

because I wanted to conclude *my* conversation with you ! ”

“ It was concluded.”

“ Oh, no, Am Rab ! Not a bit. I saw it was useless to go on then, but I was quite determined to continue later. And the only way to get into your presence is to make a row and be brought to you. So I knew I’d see you, whether I was caught or not. There, now you’ve got the whole story ! ”

“ I remember you ceased your objections rather suddenly,” commented Am Rab.

“ Yes, and I’ve just told you the reason,” replied John.

“ The reason was not, then, that you wished to explore my tent while I was absent ? ”

“ Explore your tent ? What the devil should I want to explore your tent for ? ”

“ Perhaps you can tell me that ? ”

“ I’m quite sure I can’t ! Oh, I see. My book. Local colour, and all that. Well, I’m getting all the local colour I want without searching for it ! ”

“ So ! You are writing a book ? ”

“ Going to. And you’ll be in it ! I hope you don’t mind ? ”

“ That may depend on how I figure in it.”

“ Well, that’s up to you ! ”

“ What is the purpose of this book ? ”

“ We all write books. That’s how we pay for our trips. It looks as though mine’s going to be a best seller. If it is, I’ll make enough for another trip—but it won’t be to Abyssinia, thank you ! ”

“ Do you not find Abyssinia interesting, then ? ”

“ A bit too interesting ! ”

“ Yet you should pay a second visit. It is only during a second visit that you discover the heart of a country. Of course, this is your first ? ”

"And my last! The second can go begging!"

Am Rab removed his penetrating eyes from John's face, and regarded his fingers. They were well-kept.

"I am very patient with you, Mr. Jones," he said.

"Fifty-fifty," answered John.

"I ask my questions quietly, and you give me unsatisfactory replies"

"If you asked them any other way, I'd give you an even more unsatisfactory reply. I *can* use my fist, you know"

"And I, my imagination. Your second sentence was not necessary to explain your first"

"Sorry I underestimated your imagination, Am Rab. But you make me explain such obvious things"

"One obvious thing being that you are a very hot-headed young man?"

"If you like"

"Perhaps I do not like. Perhaps I think you are a very level-headed young man. A hot-headed man would undoubtedly have used his fist before now."

"What the devil are you driving at?" frowned John

"Let us test this hot head of yours," answered Am Rab "Burawa did not ask me to kill you only. He also asked me to kill your sister."

"Oh—did he?" muttered John. "Then my next interview had better be with Burawa"

"I think it had better not be. His head is even hotter than yours, and I have even greater difficulty in controlling it. But I told Burawa that, though my mind was not made up about you, it is quite made up about your sister."

John did not answer. He merely drew a step nearer

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"She shall not be killed. If Burawa had his way with her, I should be deprived of a meeting to-night to which I look forward with very intense pleasure."

John did not hesitate. The blow he aimed at Am Rab suited both his part and his mood. Am Rab caught the fist and held it.

"I respect your courage, Mr. Jones," said the Sheik. "It is typical of your race. But our interview is over. You will now be taken back to your tent—doubly protected—and what happens to you depends no longer on yourself. It depends upon your sister."

John replied quietly, "Listen, Am Rab, and let these words sink into you. I don't care a damn what happens to me. You or Burawa can kill me, and leave my bones to rot. But if anything happens to my sister, you had better make quite sure that I am dead first!"

"Thank you, Mr. Jones," answered Am Rab.
"I will."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CHALLENGE

IT was evening. The perfect stillness seemed unnatural, and the colours might have been laid on by some artist who had consciously outraged logic to gain his effects. The unruffled surface of the pool stretched from Vera's tent to the towering foliage on the opposite shore like a mirror, in which were reflected the rich, deep greens of the trees, the vivid brilliance of great rocks burning in the last rays of the sun, and the blue of the sky purpling into night. In the east one star already glowed. Soon it would be lost in a silver tangle. A dangerous evening.

As she stood outside her tent, gazing across the water and watching the swift changes, she forgot the trouble and the terror that lay all around her. This was the kind of evening one dreamed about in crowded cities, but did not really believe in ; she had sensed it vaguely when she had first seen the Sheik's features on a half-sheet of paper, and had been fascinated even then by its incoherent beckoning. But she had not pictured the reality, or realised its hypnotic spell. She felt breathless, as though her dust-filled lungs were being deflated to prepare them for some deep draught of new experience.

Her Arab guard drowsed a little way off. A figure slipped round a rock and passed him. It passed swiftly and silently, and Vera did not notice it until she suddenly became conscious that something in

the corner of her eye was disturbing the immobility of the scene. She turned her head, and found two large, dark eyes staring at her.

The eyes were smiling, but the instant before Vera had turned they had been alive with venom. She smiled back. This was the first woman she had seen here.

The native woman continued to smile. Though slightly coarse, her features were good, and she was pretty. "She seems friendly," thought Vera. "I wonder what she wants? Perhaps she has just come along to see the sights!"

It was the excessive friendliness that saved Vera's life. All at once she became aware that there was too much of it. Sweetness seemed to be oozing out of this queer creature, and her over-affectionate proximity as she sidled closer and closer required explaining. The explanation flashed from her side. But Vera was quicker. She darted back with a cry. The Arab guard leapt up. The woman was gone.

The Arab stared in the direction in which the woman had vanished, made a movement as though to follow her, hesitated, and then turned to Vera. He looked so comically distressed that Vera almost laughed. "Poor fellow!" she thought. "He's been sleeping at his post, and he's wondering whether I shall report his offence!" To ease his mind she smiled at him. Relieved, he smiled back, showing all his white teeth.

Then he shook his head and pointed to the tent.

"That means I'm to be a good girl and go in," reflected Vera.

She looked across the water. The vivid colours were fading, and rich, velvety shadows were replacing them. There were now four stars in the east.

She gave a touch on her arm. The Arab was growing anxious. Again he pointed to the tent. "I'd better go, or I'll be pushed!" she thought. Regretfully she entered the tent. Now, encircled by canvas, only a vertical slit of the wonderful evening was visible.

The tent felt close and stuffy after the space outside.

"How long do I wait?" she wondered. "It's queer, not living by the clock!"

She thought of the clock at Mrs. Thurston's. Was it still marking the passing hours with its thin chime, and did it still give its little preparatory wheeze? She thought of the cobweb in the bathroom. Was it still hanging dejectedly from its corner? She thought of her bedroom, and of the last time she had waited there before a supper appointment. . . . Now she was waiting again, in a different world; yet the different world was moved by the same fundamental impulses, throbbing with the same eternal rhythm. . . .

The vertical slit was blocked by a form. A hand came through. In the hand was a suitcase. *Her* suitcase!

She stared at it in astonishment as it was lowered to the ground and as the hand disappeared. The last time she had seen the suitcase had been just before they had set out on their long tramp. She had snatched it up when following John out of the room in Khartoum, and it had been in the aeroplane during the journey over the desert, but on their walk they had carried only the barest necessities and had agreed to leave their luggage behind. How had the suitcase turned up again? And at this moment, when she most needed it?

She seized the case and opened it. The contents

were intact, though they were not arranged as she had left them. The evening dress of blue and green was laid carefully on top with a sheet of paper peeping from its folds. She drew the sheet out and read :

" Am Rab opens the battle. Wear this, if you hope to conquer."

She sat on her bed and thought. There was ironic humour in the challenge. It was almost a declaration of strength and weakness. Am Rab held his prisoners in the hollow of his hand, and this suitcase, symbolising his knowledge, was also a sign that he had done with subtlety. The unwritten message behind the written words ran, " I know everything. I have known all along. Lies, prevarications, fencing will not help you. Your only weapon is yourself, and I send you your evening dress to give that weapon every advantage."

In her mind Vera answered the message.

" Very well, Am Rab," she thought, as she laid the dress out on the bed—the colours were soft against the vivid hues of the blankets—" I'll accept your challenge. But I wonder whether you *really* know the weapon I'm going to fight with ? "

Then she brought the other treasures out of the case, laying them also on the bed. It was difficult to believe that many of them had once lain on Mrs. Thurston's dressing-table. She welcomed her scents and her powders as old friends who had come to her aid in the strangest test that had ever faced her. She smiled at her lip-stick. She handled her gossamer evening stockings with affection. She almost kissed her silver-backed mirror.

The hour that followed was an hour of calm enjoyment. She deliberately set worry aside—she would have found this harder to do had she known

of Am Rab's interviews with Burawa and John—and composed her mind. With tent-flap securely fastened, she changed from her dusty clothes to her evening garments, and transformed herself from a weary traveller into a ballroom ornament. Her skin no longer felt like dried parchment. It glowed. Her hair came into its own again, and the curl smiled with delight. Her lips were bright. . . .

"Too bright?" she asked her mirror.

No! Not for the occasion. She had a better excuse than Du Barry or La Pompadour, and neither of those ladies had ever attended to their beauty with more meticulous care.

CHAPTER XXIX

AM RAB'S SECRET

AM RAB, his tall imposing figure clad entirely in white, stood outside his tent as Vera approached. Behind him was the darkly-lustrous purple of the sky, and until she drew near she could only see his outline ; but when she reached him she noticed something new in his expression, and she ascribed it, rightly, to the new things he saw in her. Am Rab had hoped for these things, but had not believed them possible.

He stood looking at her for some time, while the two Arabs who had escorted her from her tent vanished back into the shadows. It was a difficult scrutiny to face coolly. It was a frank appraisal and approval of her beauty. In London it would have aroused her indignation. Here, while she realised its dangers, she accepted it as a natural primitive impulse. She was learning Am Rab quickly, but one side was still a closed book. To-night, the book would open.

" You are even more beautiful than I thought," said Am Rab.

" I score at once ? " she answered.

" Through bravery as well as beauty. You did not lower your eyes "

" Why should I ? I am not afraid of you " She wondered whether the statement were strictly true. She believed it was. If her heart beat a little fast, the cause was excitement, not fear. " Thank you for my suitcase."

" You welcomed it ? "

" Of course. I couldn't have scored without it. But the suitcase scored first. Now we're even. Where did you find it ? "

" Where you left it."

" Did you find my brother's, too ? I'm sure he'd love his razor. Oh, but he's not my brother any longer, is he ? "

" You are sensible to throw in your hand. Is that the right expression ? "

" Quite the wrong expression. I am not throwing in my hand I'm just playing you with different weapons. And I shall win, you know."

He regarded her curiously.

" What will you win ? " he inquired.

" Our battle," she replied

" My question is unanswered. What is our battle ? "

" Don't you know ? "

" Our versions may differ."

" Then I'll tell you mine later. Can we call a truce and eat ? I'm terribly hungry. Oh, but there's one question I'd like to ask first, if I may. It's about my — friend. Is he all right ? "

" He is unharmed "

" Thank you I rely on that "

" You can. Our weapons are no longer lies. So answer me a question about him with equal truth. Who is he, since he is not your brother ? "

" Just a travelling companion "

" No more ? "

" If you mean are we married, or engaged, or lovers, the answer is no."

" Then, to-night, I cannot trespass on his preserves ? "

She realised the significance of the question.

" To-night you are not going to trespass on any one's preserves," she answered

He smiled.

"Perhaps you underrate the night," he observed. "Later you may experience its potency. The necessities of life chase each other in an endless circle. . . . Is it usual in your country for a man and a woman who are not related, who are not engaged, who are not lovers, to travel on long journeys alone together?"

"It's thoroughly unusual."

"Then how does this occasion arise?"

"It's an unusual occasion. But I thought you knew all about us, Am Rab?"

"About your friend, yes. About you, only a little."

"Enough, though."

"I think not. But we are standing. Let us eat." He waved towards a low table. She glanced at it. The fare looked appetising. "You approve? I have done my best. Please sit, and we will talk as we eat. To eat in the evening under the stars destroys its vulgarity. Later, we can talk in the tent."

They began their meal. An Arab slipped forward with a bottle of wine. He filled two glasses, with pride in the operation, and vanished again.

"How do you manage all this?" asked Vera curiously.

"By not depending on my host for the luxuries I enjoy," answered Am Rab. "This wine hasn't come from Burawa's cellar, or these glasses from his house, or my blankets from his shops. Like the snail, I carry my home with me. My caravan is well equipped."

"I admire your taste in wine," she said, as she sipped.

"And I your taste in perfume," he replied, bending forward suddenly. "Like myself, you are not contented with the second-best. Is not that so?"

Your scent, your clothes, your friends, your love-making?" She did not reply. "Your story, if you tell it to me, will prove me right, I think."

"It's a long story."

"So is the night."

"And—rather ugly."

"So is the morning, till we find its beauty again in the sunlight." He smiled a little sadly. "Existence blends beauty with ugliness. Each needs the other."

"I'm not sure that I agree with that."

"It is true. The beauty of this moment is exalted by the ugliness that surrounds it. The oppressions of yesterday and the fears of to-morrow. Beauty is our escape. Who but the prisoner knows the real joy of freedom?" His eyes became grave. "Your own story, perhaps, is the story of a prisoner who attempts to escape?"

"I thought you didn't know my story?" she exclaimed, staring at him.

"The details, no," he answered. "The shape, yes. There is a proverb in your country that I like. 'You cannot see the forest for the trees.' There lies the white man's blindness. He looks so hard at the trees that he is lost in them. Their twisted branches strangle him. He does not see the shape they make. But some of us in the East have longer vision. We see the form of life, and that becomes our first concern. If I am wrong, the details of your story will not fit the form I see you in."

"You're a remarkable man, Am Rab," said Vera, after a pause. "Yes, I'll tell you my story."

She told it while the darkness deepened around them, and while the almost imprisoned light of a swinging lamp flickered on her features. He listened silently, intently. Often his eyes strayed from her face to rest on her shoulder or her arm, or the blue-

green ruffle round her neck. She knew what he was thinking at these moments. None of the moments escaped her. But she did not interrupt her story or attempt to modify its true significance. She was using her deadliest weapon on him—the weapon of utter frankness. It was a weapon no woman had ever used on him before.

When she had finished he remained silent. The silence continued till it suddenly became unbearable. It intensified feeling ; made her nerves prick. She raised her eyes for the relief of the sky, but the stars seemed to be pouring down in an attempt to drown her.

"What are you thinking ?" she demanded abruptly.

"Of you, naturally," he answered.

"Well, now you know all about me."

"The details fit the form."

"You know that I attract every sort of man."

"And run away from every sort of man."

"And bring trouble to them all !"

"Because you run away. But you have not run away from me !"

"No."

"Why is that ? It is the one part of your story you have not told."

"But you know it."

"Perhaps I flatter myself ! Correct me."

"It is because I want something from you that you won't sell," she said. "And that I won't sell myself for."

"Then how do we profit ?" asked Am Rab.

"Either of us ?"

He rose and walked away for a few paces. Then he swung round and regarded her almost angrily.

"What have you done to me ?" he demanded.

" There is another woman here. . . ." He controlled himself, and went on more quietly, " Tell me this. Since I want you, why do I not take you ? It is my usual way."

" I think I can tell you that, Am Rab," answered Vera. " Isn't it because you respect me, as I respect you ? You won't sell your secret, and I won't sell my love. We're not content with the second-best."

He moved swiftly back to his seat.

" If I give you my secret," he said in a low voice, " will you then give me your love ? "

She tried to say, " No," but the word stuck. She was seized by a sudden dizziness. This was the moment she had played for—the moment John had planned and plotted for, and risked his life for—but now it had come it filled her not with triumph but nausea and self-loathing. Through a mist she heard his swift words :

" Listen, then—though what do politics mean to women ? Yet to you, perhaps, who have a mind. . . . Presently there will be trouble. Here ? Elsewhere ? Who knows ? It will be at some point where race rules race and white men snatch at the pieces. In truth, it may be here. But wherever it is, and whenever it comes, the little flame will be fanned. It will spread. It will become a great fire. In it will burn the white man's domination—his false possessions, his false boundaries, his false idols of power and wealth and vanity ! The flame will drive him back to where he belongs, and if he will not stay there and be content, the flame will burn his own dominion ! And those who are left—weakened, impoverished, afraid—scattered, protectionless—shall rebuild their homes with the help of the conquering stranger, who will be kind to them, and claim a portion for his kindness ! " His voice, at first soft

and low, grew louder and more harsh. Suddenly he laughed. His eyes glinted with more than the light from the swinging lamp. "Yes, and so they will remain—scorned, humbled, seeking to retain their dignity among themselves by clasping their ridiculed traditions, until . . ." He jumped up and laughed again. "Until they, too, shall forget their separate difficulties and band together, and watch for the moment when the oppressor trips!"

He raised his arms towards the stars, then dropped them suddenly. The fire died in his eyes, and was replaced by weariness.

"And thus we move!"

He sat down again. Now his eyes were on hers. She saw the suppressed hunger in them. He waited.

"Well?" he asked at last.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"What makes you sorry?"

"I wish you hadn't told me."

"Am I to wish that, too?" He shook his head slowly. "I see you do not understand."

"I think I do understand," she replied. "You are right—from your point of view."

"What other have we?"

She was silent.

"The white man has his."

"Yes."

"Then how shall we escape from the circle that leads nowhere to the straight line that leads into infinity?"

"I believe I know, Am Rab. But I am only a beginner—like you."

She looked at him earnestly. He stared back.

"Tell me," he said.

"We must forget our point of view," she replied. "No—I don't mean that. You see, I *am* only a

beginner—things are in my heart, but when I try to express them I am beaten at once ! ”

“ Perhaps I can guess what you are trying to express ? ”

“ Then help me ! ”

“ Perhaps I can see into your heart. There is a bigger point of view.”

“ That’s it ! ”

“ And ours can be expressed within it.”

“ Yes.”

“ It admits of all expression.” He paused. “ Bad, as well as good ? ”

“ It helps the good, and forgives the bad. But do we know what is good and bad ? Do you know, Am Rab ? I don’t ! ”

“ We have our hearts.”

“ Yes—only our hearts ! Perhaps—do you think ? —our hearts are the straight line, and our words are the circle ? I couldn’t argue with your words, Am Rab. I even seemed to agree with them. But my heart didn’t. I’m trying to find out why.”

“ Continue, if you please.”

“ Your words mean slaughter.”

“ Slaughter that follows slaughter.”

“ As one lie follows another. Does that excuse it ? . . . Am Rab, is *this* our escape from the circle ? The escape from our words, that can prove anything, back to our hearts, that can prove nothing ? My mind will imitate your lie, but my heart will have faith, and reply with the truth ! ”

Am Rab drew a slow breath.

“ Faith,” he repeated. “ And if through faith we can escape from the circle that imprisons our hearts, what do lesser boundaries matter ? We can starve our bodies and our earthly desires—watch living beauty fade into a memory—and so find peace ? Is that what you are saying ? ”

"I—I think so," she faltered.

He stretched out his hand and touched her bare arm for an instant.

"That much," he said.

Her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Am Rab—I feel a beast!"

"Because you cannot reward me for my secret?"

He removed his eyes from hers, and fixed them on a knife. "Well, my secret was told in faith. What will you do? To prevent this slaughter?"

The situation began to suffocate her.

"And what must I do?" he went on. "You now possess dangerous knowledge."

"Then you must get rid of me!"

"And your friend?"

"He doesn't possess the knowledge!"

"But will, when you return to him?"

"No!" she cried sharply.

"Why not?" he pressed, watching her very closely. His fingers were on the knife. "It is, surely, your duty? Is it because I should then have to get rid of him, also? And because you love him?"

Her cheeks flamed.

"Honour me by answering."

"Yes—I love him!"

"And that is why I may not have my reward?"

"There is no other reason."

"Then, for his sake, am I not the person to be got rid of?"

He slid the knife across the table to her. She seized it, beaten. But his fingers gripped her wrist as the point of the blade was within two inches of her breast.

"You've won, Am Rab!" she sobbed.

The knife slipped to the ground. He caught her in his arms and carried her into his tent.

CHAPTER XXX

VANISHING DREAMS

WHEN Vera opened her eyes she was lying on the Sheik's bed. The tent was in darkness, but a figure was standing near her, watching her, and at first she thought it was Am Rab. Then, as her mind cleared, she realised that it was not, and she gave a stifled exclamation.

"OK, Vera," came John's voice. "Don't worry."

She lay still for a few minutes. John's quiet, reassuring tone calmed her. At last she asked:

"What's happening?"

"I don't know," replied John. "Am Rab brought me here, and the order not to worry came from him. So—now you've opened your eyes—I'm not worrying."

He was but did not admit it.

"Where is Am Rab?" she inquired.

"Again, I don't know," he answered, "but I've an idea, from something I overheard when he was talking to the guards outside—there are about a dozen of them—he's with Burawa."

"Did he tell you why he brought you here?"

John hesitated, then said, "No."

"Did he tell you—anything?"

"Only what I've told you. That we're not to worry. I've no notion what it all means, Vera. Perhaps you have?"

"Yes, John, I think I know."

"Well?"

"But I may be wrong. John—I'm dead tired I can't tell you how tired. Now you're here—don't go, will you?—I want to be still and not think. Let's talk later."

"Right, Vera," he nodded "I imagine you've been through it. But there are two things I must know, however tired you are. Please. Was Am Rab—decent to you?"

"Yes."

"Thank God! Now for the second. Did you learn anything from him?"

"That's what we'll talk about later."

"You mean——!"

"I'm going to sleep Good-night"

She closed her eyes When she opened them again she found, to her surprise, that she really had gone to sleep Voices woke her John's and Am Rab's.

"But you don't mean at once?" John was saying

"It cannot be too soon," answered Am Rab.

"May I know the reason?"

"Do you still act a part, Mr Jones?"

"I would if it still served any purpose. I gather it doesn't. My real name, if you want to know it, is Graham."

"Yes. Late of His Majesty's Air Force Now, Mr. Graham, you may understand my reason a little better. And also realise the necessity for haste"

There was a short pause Then John said :

"Your intelligence department works well, Am Rab."

"Yours, too?"

"I've learned nothing since I came here, if that's what you mean"

"Nothing at all? Since I left you last?"

"Nothing at all Oh, yes, one thing. That you

have treated my friend courteously. Thank you."

"The thanks are due to her," replied Am Rab, looking towards the bed. He met Vera's eyes. He was carrying a small lamp. It was still dark outside. "You have heard? That your visit is concluding? I hope you have had some sleep, and are ready to travel?"

"Yes, I'm quite ready, Am Rab," she answered.
"But—"

"The little that remains to be said shall be said later," he interposed. "Meanwhile, let your mind be at rest while you prepare for the journey."

"Will some one put us on our way?" asked John. "We arrived here in the dark, and we're leaving in the dark."

"I shall accompany you," replied Am Rab. "Our horses now wait outside. Come, Mr. Graham. You and I will wait with them while your friend changes her dress. Her suitcase is by the bed."

He turned and left the tent. John, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

When Vera joined them she found everything in readiness. Three horses stood waiting. Am Rab and John were already on two of them. An Arab by the third helped her to mount hers, and the next moment they were moving. The horses started with almost disconcerting suddenness, as though conscious of urgency.

They passed through the tents of the two camps—the first of the Arabs, the second of the Danakils. The tents were silent, but seemed to possess dark watchful eyes. A tall figure stood outside one. It was Burawa.

He glowered at them as they trotted by. Am Rab paid no attention to him, but John was ready for any

sudden movement, and manœuvred his horse between Vera and the Danakil chief. The sudden movement did not materialise, however. Burawa merely watched ; a motionless, sinister shadow.

They reached the open. The horses broke into a gallop, Am Rab's leading, the other two following. Again Vera experienced a new sensation in locomotion—galloping on the back of a swift, sure-footed horse across desert country under the stars.

The journey continued in silence broken only by the ceaseless *plop* of the horses' hooves. The darkness faded, the stars grew pale, and the sun rose. Presently, after a timeless period, Vera saw ahead a line of tall acacias that looked vaguely familiar. The trees rose stimulatingly out of monotony, bringing back movement to her dulled mind. She glanced at John, who was riding close beside her, and he nodded.

" Nearly there," he said.

Am Rab, ahead, slackened his pace, allowing them to draw level. Then as they fell into an easy trot, he ended his long silence with a surprising statement.

" Many years ago I saved your lives. Do you remember the occasion ? "

" I'm afraid I don't," answered John.

" But that is strange," proceeded the Sheik, " for is not that why you are here ? It was in England. A fire. I saved you both from a burning room. And you vowed that, if ever you could perform me a return service, you would do so."

John and Vera looked at each other, but did not interrupt.

Am Rab went on, " Well, if you forget this thing, I—fortunately—have remembered it. Let me continue to refresh your memory. You learned, years later—only recently, in fact—that a plot I was

beginning to instigate had been discovered. You knew that, if I continued, I would be thwarted, and perhaps, shot. So you journeyed here to warn me, lest I should continue. The journey was a symbol of the white man's gratitude. When I told Burawa, he was incredulous. To him, such nobility was strange, coming from another race. Yes, he refused at first to believe it. When I had convinced him, he asked about the plot. 'It is the plot,' I answered him, 'which I came here to discuss with you, having already discussed it with some others—the plot in which you would have played your part—and, as it now falls, for which you would have suffered the penalty. You, Burawa, would also have been shot but for the arrivals of this man and girl. The white people have many eyes. We must wait a while longer before their eyes are lulled and their senses numbed by power. Perhaps our children, and not we, will see the day, and seize it.'

Am Rab paused. His eyes became dreamy for a moment. Then he went on :

"And so Burawa's mood altered, and so we came away without trouble. And so my plot dies in its infancy."

John looked at Vera again, but this time she did not meet his glance. She was looking at Am Rab.

"Do you want it to die with me, too?" she asked.

"That is as *you* want," he replied. "It is no longer my infant. If it grows one day, it will be some one else's child—and it *will* grow unless the white man changes his mood, as I have perhaps changed mine."

"What has changed it, Am Rab?"

"That is a question I have asked myself during these hours. I shall continue to ask it. Not an evening dress. Not the body within the dress. The

spirit within the body? The spirit that, for a few rare moments to be remembered when much else fades, joined mine and escaped from the circle?" He turned his head, and rested his eyes on her for a second, then quickly withdrew them. "She will answer all your questions, Mr. Graham. Secrets make barriers. There is no need for them."

"Then I can wait," answered John. "But there is one question you can answer and she cannot. Why, if you pacified Burawa, was it necessary for us to hurry away as we did?"

"There are others besides Burawa," answered Am Rab. "He told me that, during your last—argument?—with his men, three received blows from you. There is only one way in which these three can wipe out the indignity. Burawa himself may change. He is not dependable. And there is a jealous woman. She has made one attempt to use her knife. She still carries it. . . . Well, we have arrived. Now you will change your steeds, and I will watch you vanish into the air. You will go to Khartoum?"

"Yes, that will be our first hop."

"And it reminds me. In Khartoum you can return your friend's aeroplane to him. And you can apologise to him for me that he was kidnapped by my agent there."

"What—he's not dead?" cried John.

"We are not Danakils, we do not kill for the pleasure of it," replied Am Rab. "And sometimes, even when we intend to kill for other reasons, we do not succeed—as you yourself will know, Mr. Graham. You have run greater risks than your friend. I am glad you have survived them."

The tall acacias, sentinels of the oasis, loomed before them. They stopped. John slipped from his

horse, then helped Vera to dismount ; but Am Rab remained in his saddle.

" Its impossible to find the right words, Am Rab," said John. " I'm not going to try. Perhaps the best thing I can say is that I hope we shall meet again."

" The hope is shared," answered the Sheik. He turned to Vera. " Your suitcase."

He unslung it from his saddle and held it out. She went to him and took it. Their fingers touched for an instant.

" I fear, when you open it, you will find one thing lost," murmured Am Rab.

" My—evening dress ? " she asked.

" You guess well. It is not there."

" If you find it, Am Rab, please keep it for me," she said. " To wear again one night, perhaps."

" You have great understanding," replied Am Rab.

Ten minutes later, he watched a little speck grow smaller and smaller in the blue dome of the sky.

CHAPTER XXXI

SHADOWS IN SUNLIGHT

"WELL?" asked the detective, as the inspector replaced the receiver.

"Davis's luck again," answered the inspector. "He met them at Croydon, and he's bringing them along."

"He identified the man?"

"Immediately."

"And the girl?"

The inspector nodded.

"By our photograph and his one glimpse of her at Milan. No doubt about it, they're the two globe-trotters we've been looking for. *Wouldn't* Davis find 'em?"

"But we found Davis," retorted the detective, smiling. "Don't give away all the credit."

"Credit!" repeated the inspector grimly. "Oh, we'll get a lot of that!" He glanced at a report on his desk. The detective followed his glance. "They came like lambs. It seems they were coming anyway . . . I told Davis that was why I was letting him look after them."

"Did he swallow it?" inquired the detective, his eyes still on the report.

"Like a whale," answered the inspector.

"What about the police car?"

"Following. And a bad second, if I know anything about Davis!"

The inspector's prediction was correct. Davis arrived in an illegally short time, as though determined to give his two passengers one last thrill on

the final lap of their journey back from a murderous camp to civilisation.

"The sooner I get you there, the sooner it will be over," was his excuse. "And don't forget, I've believed in you from the word go!"

"You'll believe in us more when we do get there," John had assured him. "If you stay to hear our statement."

Vera had said nothing. She felt as though she were journeying back to reality from a strange dream. Yet the reality seemed stranger than the dream, for she was re-entering it from a new angle, and the process of readjustment rendered her silent. She had left London with a sense of irresponsibility. The chase had grown unfair. Who could blame her for running away? But now her responsibility had returned and increased. She had passed through experiences and touched realities that had matured it, developing her from an unformed girl to a woman with self-knowledge. During her travels she had met emergencies with quick intelligence, she had kept men in their places, and had learned philosophy. Now she was returning to her own country, to rules and regulations, to newspapers and gossip, to the pressure of insular traditions—and her re-entry was via a police station! Sordid fingers stretched invisibly around her, trying to grasp her spirit. Would that spirit be able to remain as free as it had been in the desert? . . .

The inspector rose from his desk as the car drew up and the occupants entered.

"Well, here we are!" boomed Davis, who had small respect for rules and regulations. His own spirit was quite irrepressible. "And don't forget they came of their own free will."

"That's true, inspector," said John, "though I

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imagine we'd have found our way here whether I wanted to come or not. I'm quite aware we've shadowed during the last half of our journey.

The inspector and the detective exchanged glances. The detective made a little grimace.

"Well, now you are here, sir," began the inspector, "perhaps—"

"We'll make our statements," interrupted John, "Miss Henley—"

"Henley? You mean Wray?"

"She uses the name of Wray—her mother's name—but her real name, and the name on her passport, is Henley. Now listen, inspector, I understand that Mr. Menzies died at 1.53 a.m. Miss Henley was with me at that time, at my rooms in Craddock Street. She left at 2.18. I'll swear it on the Bible, if you'll give me one," he added. "And by the way, to clear her on all counts, I may mention that we're engaged. As soon as we leave this police station we shall make one more call—to the Foreign Office—and then look around for a registrar."

"There's one three doors off," interposed Davis, with a grin. "Shall I shoot off and give him the green light?"

The inspector frowned, but the detective enjoyed the joke, and grinned also.

"Might I say a word?" inquired the inspector.

"We're waiting," answered John, taking Vera's hand and unashamedly squeezing it.

"Thank you," said the inspector, and took up writing on his desk. "We have just received some information which will make it quite unnecessary for you to swear anything on the Bible. It is rather tragic, but—well, it lets us all out of a difficulty."

His voice was grave. The detective's grin vanished.

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the first Davis's also. The inspector continued, after camp use.

"It is a confession from the person who was responsible for Mr. Menzies' death. This person has been following our activities closely, and has even operated with us, and thus became aware that we were at last on the track of Miss Wray—I should say, Henley. The news that we expected to make in arrest very shortly produced a reaction. She left London last night—"

"She?" cried Vera.

"Mrs. Menzies," said the inspector quietly. "She wrote her confession at a small hotel in Birmingham, and then took an overdose of veronal. She was found this morning. The signed confession is now in the hands of the Birmingham police, who telephoned the contents through only an hour ago." He touched the paper. "This is a copy. Would you like to read it now, Miss Henley—or, perhaps, a little later?"

"Later," exclaimed John, watching Vera anxiously.

"No, now, please," answered Vera. "I'm all right."

But she looked pale as she took the sheet from the inspector's hand.

The confession was a pathetic document, the remorse of a jealous wife who had one impulsive murder, but who drew the second deliberate one. It said that she had waited for her husband's return on the fatal night, he did not return, she followed him to Vera's house and met him just as he was leaving. She suffered the worst. As they stood quarrelling in the front garden, she struck him, and he fell. He lay motionless in the kitchen area. In terror, she fled.

"I knew he was dead—there was nothing I could do," the confession proceeded. "And when next

